

THE BODY EXPERIENCE

by

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DEDICATION

This story is for survivors.

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ABSTRACT

After a deadly disease sends a jaded college graduate to an isolation ward, a virtual technology provides all the escape she could dream of. When her life collides with an abused woman fleeing across the country, they both struggle to find each other before it is too late.

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CHAPTER ONE

The first thing they told me in Denver was not to panic. I wanted to walk to my room but they made me wait in a wheelchair. It's hard to tell how tired I am until I sit down and the exhaustion tingles through my arms and legs. Sometimes I never want to stand up again. Everything feels like it takes ten times the effort to accomplish, and I can't stop coughing, but that's why I'm here. I'm here to get better. I have to believe that.

Originally, I thought it was a flu I couldn't shake. I walked to the closest hospital, hoping for quick antibiotics and a bill I could fight for a few months. The sun had burned away the clouds hours ago, and by the time I got to the sliding-door entrance, I was sweating. The waiting room looked like the inside of a school bus. Rows of vinyl chairs pushed close enough to be uncomfortable stood in lines facing the glass welcome window. The grey paint was chipping off the walls. In the corner, a daytime talk show mumbled through a T.V. screen. I walked through the middle of the room and checked in with the front desk nurse. Since I wasn't dying, I knew they wouldn't be rushing to call me back. Technically, we're all waiting for death, but since mine wasn't approaching fast or visually, I prepared for a long wait.

There were only five other groupings of people scattered among the chairs, and it was hard to tell who was a potential patient and who was there for support. I made my own support, pulling a chair in front of me in a quiet corner to rest my feet on. Then, I disappeared into my phone. The dog walking company I worked for had posted new pictures on their page. My scheduler app showed three walks lined up for the next

morning, and my stomach dropped at the thought of having to cancel. I flipped through the posts, looking for something to cheer me up. I scrolled through pictures of cats. I didn't even like cats. The people in the waiting room stared at the local news cycling through the television screen. The news reporter interviewed kayakers on the river walk, asking how they planned to enjoy this beautiful Pittsburgh day.

Hours later, a short, olive-colored nurse opened a door at the front of the room and called my name out. I set my phone to silent and shoved it back into my pocket. I followed him down a hallway of examining rooms. We wove through other patient and nurse pairings, avoiding physical contact as much as possible. When we got to my room, he flipped some plastic markers by the doorframe and ushered me in. The nurse pointed to an exam table separated by light blue curtains on either side. The waxy paper crunched against my jeans and I shifted backwards until my feet hung above the floor. I folded my hands together to avoid touching the weird paper.

"So, how are you today?" He brushed through his tablet, skimming through my medical history.

I'd been telling everyone I was fine, still recovering, almost better. The truth was no amount of sleep left me feeling rested. My skin went from pale-pink to pale with no undertones at all. Even my hair was taking on a straw-like feel.

"I'm okay."

"And can you describe what's going on? Briefly?" The nurse held his short fingers over the tablet.

"Sure. I'm pretty tired. My throat's been sore for a while."

"About how long?"

“A month?”

“Alright, let’s get your vitals and then the doctor will come see you and ask you more details about your symptoms.” The nurse took my blood pressure and temperature at the same time, in silence. I had a slight fever, but that was no surprise to me. He typed a few more notes into his tablet before rushing out of the room and mumbling it would be about a twenty-minute wait.

I stood, and paged through a magazine from the previous year, then read a healthy relationship pamphlet collecting dust in the wall holders. It was hard to believe pamphlets like this were really changing anyone’s lives. “How to Stretch Your Take-Out Meal into Four Meals.” That’s a pamphlet I could use. My eyes were tired, but the giant fluorescent light made it impossible for me to fall asleep. I lay back down on the paper lounge and curled around my phone. I took a test on what kind of house I should buy, based on my personality. Even the test seemed to know that its users would all be renting for the rest of their lives.

Forty minutes later, someone knocked and asked if they could come in. A woman walked in wearing glasses that reminded me of a red and yellow frog I’d seen at a zoo once, and a short black braid along her neck. The nurse followed after her.

“Hi, Rowen, I’m Dr. Matthews. Nurse Julian tells me you’re not feeling so great?”

“I’ve been better,” I said.

“Well, let’s see what’s going on.” The doctor stood and put her stethoscope into her ears. She talked through each of her motions, listening to the front and back of my chest while maneuvering inside my T-shirt. Taking a deep breath felt like I had six

bungee cords wrapped around me. I wondered what she heard in there. I imagined I was breathing the smoothest, softest air possible and timed my coughs in between movements of the instrument. I try to be polite, even when I'm not feeling well. When she finished listening, she didn't say anything, but pressed her lips together like she was thinking.

The nurse handed her the tablet.

"So, Rowen," the doctor said. "Have you had a fever in the past two weeks?"

"Well, I don't have a thermometer," I said. "But I have been feeling hot and cold."

"Okay, and a slight one today. Have you felt chilled or been sweaty at night?"

"A little but..."

"I know, it's summer. What about coughing?"

I nodded.

"Are you coughing anything up?"

"Not really," I lied. Whenever I coughed at work, I just swallowed quick or took a drink of water. Being sick grossed me out.

The doctor tapped her fingers against the side of the tablet. "Well, let's run some tests."

After pricking my ring finger, drawing two vials from my arm, shoving a stick up my nose, and listening to me breathe, they ruled out one disease, then another. So far, I knew it wasn't a flu, a cold, or mono. With mono I'd be sick for another month or two. I couldn't even imagine that.

"We're pretty sure it's pneumonia," Dr. Matthews said. "But let's go check."

Pneumonia didn't sound great, but I could deal with it. I'd had a mild version of it when I was little. We left the room and walked through the hallway, through several metal doors. The doors to rooms grew farther apart until we stopped in front of a door marked X-RAY.

"This will confirm things, just in case." The doctor motioned me into the room where a technician wearing green scrubs greeted me. *In case what?* I thought. The technician swung the X-ray machine over my ribs. The doctor stepped into the small observation room, safe from the radiation. I stood with my arms up over my head, like a surrender. The technician told me to take a deep breath in. The machine whirred and clicked. I exhaled.

With the X-ray done, another nurse walked me back to my original exam room. I waited. I checked my phone, read about pneumonia home treatments, and even read a chapter of the book I'd found at a yard sale. Something about "pushing through" and a list of things I couldn't hope to accomplish before I was thirty. But what else was new. When the doctor returned, she had a different looking mask tied flat against her face.

"I'll need you to put this on to prevent contagions." She handed me a mask of my own and stuck my X-ray into a light box on the wall.

My pulse quickened. I fumbled with the mask and shifted to face the light box. Whatever was wrong with me couldn't be that bad, right?

"All of this should be dark," Dr. Matthews said. Her finger circled around the outline of each lung.

I nodded, as if I knew what my lungs were supposed to look like.

"Do you see these white circles up here?"

I could.

“That’s tuberculosis.”

After they tested the phlegm I’d been coughing up, I was moved to a room on the third floor. Someone brought me a cellophane-wrapped sandwich and water. I didn’t even know what tuberculosis was, so they gave me a one-sided handout to read. All my symptoms were on it, and then some. It didn’t look good. A mixture of fear and anxiety washed over me, and the only thing I knew to do was to keep finding out more about it. I sat cross-legged on the bed and hunched over my phone. Against my better judgment, I searched up about tuberculosis. Some of the search hits linked to movies and artists that had died from it. There were bony women with flushed faces and eyes bulging from their skulls. They might have passed for fashion models. I saw a black and white picture of twenty people lying on what looked like beach chairs bundled up in thick fur blankets, then a scratched up chest X-ray with a gnarled line cutting one of the lungs in half. My hands grew too sweaty to hold the phone and I lowered myself back onto the bed. I realized I was shaking. I still didn’t really know what it all meant.

I’d been at the hospital since the early afternoon and the sun had set a long time ago. I texted my manager saying why I wouldn’t be at Wags and Tails in the morning to pick up my keys for the dogs. When I worked up the courage to search for articles on my phone again, I learned that humans had been fighting the disease for as long as humans existed. TB was most commonly found in the lungs but could be in other places, and it took a long time to cure. Though I knew there was nothing I could do, I couldn’t shake that panicked feeling, couldn’t stop my heart from thudding in my apparently very sick

chest. They didn't still cut people's lungs out, did they? I curled up in the scratchy hospital blankets and fell asleep trying to focus on how I'd make up the money for the shifts I would miss. Vanessa at Marie Ellen's Boutique, my other job, owed me for when she'd needed to re-do a whole week of scheduling. Maybe she could give me a few hours during the next big sale. Thin, drawn faces haunted my sleep. But this wasn't back then, surely there'd be a better cure for someone like me.

While I lay in shock in my room, the doctors grew my TB bacteria at high speed in plastic petri dishes. If any of the four antibiotics slowed the bacterial growth, I could go home and barricade myself in my apartment. I'd have to come in for regular X-rays and follow-ups, and I wouldn't be able to go to work. But the state would pay for me to get better. At least I didn't have to worry about that.

I woke up the next day to Dr. Matthews' knocking. My phone said ten a.m., with texts from Wags and Paws saying they'd cover my shifts for today and to feel better soon. The doctor's hair was down today, in little ringlet curls that fell to her neck. The faint smell of coffee hung on her clothes.

"Rowen, I have a lot to tell you. The first thing you need to know is you won't be going to work today."

One of the nurses must have mentioned what I'd said about having to work.

"We got the results of your tests this morning, and none of the four drugs had any effect. What this means is that the four most popular antibiotics, the ones that cure a lot of the TB that we see, are not going to work on the TB that you have."

"I thought TB was a bacteria," I said.

"It is."

“Isn’t a bacteria a good thing? I mean... bacteria, antibiotics. There is still something I can take, right?” I sat straight up.

“Your treatment will be intensive. It’s going to take longer to fight your TB. There are lots of things the specialists can try, but I can’t make any promises for when you’ll be done. I’ve contacted the Center for Disease Control, and they called around to see where to take you—”

My heart raced. I felt hot and cold at the same time. “The CDC? Why can’t I stay here?” My voice came out like a whine. I hated myself for it. I didn’t want to cry.

“You’ll be in a specialized hospital in Denver, Colorado until your TB is no longer active.”

“Denver?” I said. “I can’t go to Denver.”

Dr. Matthews spoke in a low voice that was supposed to calm me down. She said I couldn’t stay in any normal hospital room. Isolation rooms for TB meant special air circulation, filters, low air pressure. Nurses and doctors would watch me swallow every pill, monitor my side effects, and continue testing me until the bacteria was gone. Screw that.

“What about my apartment? My things?” I couldn’t believe how little they’d thought through their plan. “Do you think my jobs are going to wait around until I’m better? I can’t just leave everything. This is ridiculous.”

The doctor held my gaze. “This is out of our hands now. The CDC says you have to go. It’s your best chance at recovering from this, Rowen.”

I already knew the answer about my jobs. Of course my bosses wouldn’t wait. My student loan repayments could be paused, but the interest would keep building until it

undid what little progress I'd made. Had I gotten any of my friends sick? How the hell did something like this happen anyway? Everything kept circling back to the same conclusion: I couldn't leave. This thought echoed in my head until it was booming and pulsating and I found myself screaming it at the doctor and nurses who had run into the room.

"You are highly contagious," Dr. Matthews said. She stepped backward toward the door. "But don't panic. You can't panic. This is a long-term fight." I tried to ask more questions, but between the crying and coughing she wished me good luck and stepped behind the door. She kept saying it would be okay. But it wasn't okay, nothing was. I didn't deserve an illness that erased me from my life here. I pulled my knees toward my chest and sobbed, alone in my room, with nothing but blue curtains separating me from a living nightmare I wanted no part of.

CHAPTER TWO

She was sitting on the floor of their apartment brushing Anise when the front door swung open. Webb prowled in and tossed his bag down. As he walked toward her, Vi saw a pale brunette woman leaning against the doorframe. The woman's hair curled in large S-shapes down her front, settling on top of her button-up shirt.

"I'm going to need you to leave for a bit," Webb said. He glanced at the woman, then back at her. "Two hours. You can grab some dinner out." He handed her the key and a ten dollar bill.

Vi stood, looking down at the soft dog fur on her shorts. Careful not to meet his eyes, she cupped her hand for Webb to drop the key and money into.

Webb guided the woman toward their kitchen. "So, you want anything to eat?" Muttered conversation. The woman touching his arm. Him leaning against their counter and shooting a glare Vi's way. *Leave*, it said. So she did.

Anise plunked down the carpeted stairs of their apartment building. Front feet, then back feet, like a stiff slinky. Anise weighed eighteen pounds, somewhere between a lap dog and an athlete. A Shetland Sheepdog, her fur lay in two thick coats— the undercoat like a feather pillow, and the outer coat had shades of chocolate that shone whether brushed or not. A white line ran along her forehead and down her nose, slightly off-center. Vi followed behind, holding the worn leather leash. The last bit of overheard conversation echoed in her head. "My roommate will be gone awhile." My roommate. That's what he'd said. The words marched her down the stairs. *Room. Mate. Room. Mate.*

When she pushed the glass door open to the street, Vi told herself it was another evening walk. This was any other day when Webb said things he didn't mean, and surely he had a reason for it. Besides, he'd need her later.

Vi made it a few steps before the whole scene upstairs swept through her mind like a video fast-forwarded and she inhaled in a hideous, ugly way. All the feelings she'd hid behind a wall of numbness threatened to leap from her throat. Her face pushed up and down at the same time and a spot of pain sprouted from her forehead and seized down her neck until she nearly threw up. Vi pulled Anise's leash around the corner of their building.

"What am I doing?" Vi asked out loud.

Anise pulled her ears back and stood still, staring at her.

"He's..." Her hands shook as she pressed them against her cheekbones, willing the tears to stop. It was useless. From between her fingers, the tears kept flowing, dripping down her chin. She sank to the ground, sitting with her feet tucked close. Thick mucous ran from her nose, but she didn't care anymore. Webb couldn't see her from here.

"I'm sorry, Anise." She wiped her hand on the inside of her shirt. She had to think about later, when she'd walk back into the apartment and need to look as if nothing had changed. The dog moved closer to her and Vi smoothed back the hair on Anise's narrow head. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

She'd given Webb second chances all the time. She'd given in to his rules, and helped him through all the jobs he'd lost from being stubborn, or from not being able to work on a team. Webb would have said all his former bosses and co-workers were idiots.

Especially the women. In the beginning she'd thought of herself as special, the lone light able to get into the real Webb. As if she were the only one who could really see him, and that he had selected her from all the other beautiful women to share his life with. He'd cheated on her before, and every time she'd found out, she'd accepted his apology even though a part of her knew she hadn't forgiven him. Accepting was easier when the acts were out of sight. But to act so loving right in front of her, with some woman who hadn't been there for him, who hadn't served as the calm to his storm, it was new. New in the worst possible way.

"I've done everything he's asked of me," Vi said. She pulled Anise into her arms and stood up. "But nothing is ever going to be good enough, is it? I'm an idiot. I'm so sorry."

The sounds of the world came back to Vi as she snapped into the present. Distant cars, a delivery truck rumbling, a basketball bouncing on pavement. She needed to act now, to make her plan before she got back to the apartment. Before he used his special, private voice that he only used when he was really, really sorry.

Vi and Anise walked through the backstreets until she got to the corner coffee shop. It wasn't too crowded: a few people on computers, two girls on what looked like a first date in the corner. She sat outside at a table with a large green umbrella tilted against the breeze. Anise lay by her feet. A little more than an hour, plus ten minutes to walk home.

Her stomach rumbled and her throat was dry. She felt for the ten dollars in the pocket of her jean shorts and looked through the window toward the counter. Above the

counter, she saw a chalkboard with daily specials, a glowing case full of pastries and treats. She pulled her hand out. A few curled leaves swept through the table legs, one of them sticking to an old spider web. The air carried the hint of fall approaching, and in that moment Vi wanted nothing more than a hot cup to hold while she figured out what she wanted to do.

“Alright, Anise, I’ll be back. Stay here.” She held her hand in front of Anise’s nose, their command for “stay.”

As she pushed the door open, the smell of bread, cinnamon, and coffee beans wrapped around her like a warm blanket. Her eyes swept the room, making sure he wasn’t there even though she knew her paranoia to be unnecessary. *This is why I need to leave*, she thought. Someone had left a pile of folded paper sheets with “free poetry” written in mock-Old English font. She stuffed one in her back pocket so she could use the paper later.

Behind the counter, two women prepped cinnamon roll dough for the oven while a lady with a long grey braid called out a smoothie order to the room. Vi read what she now saw was a digital screen disguised as a chalkboard. Three dollars for coffee, and at least another three if she ordered food. She wanted to keep as much of the cash as she could. But she needed something. At the end of the counter, she saw a pitcher with free water. The coffee would have to wait.

The woman with the braid made her way over. From far away, Vi thought she was wearing a long sleeve shirt, but up close she saw that the woman was covered in dark blue tattoos.

“What looks good?” The woman smiled, at ease and unhurried.

“Could I get one of those?” Vi pointed to a cheese danish with a golden, flaking crust.

“For here or to go?”

“To go.”

“Alright, I’ll meet you at the counter.”

While the danish warmed in the toaster oven, Vi looked for Anise through the window. The dog was sleeping, her nose in a patch of sunshine. Vi smiled, then turned back to the register.

“Three twelve,” the lady said.

Vi nodded and pushed the ten dollars across the counter. She shoved the change into her front pocket and wiggled a paper cup free from its stack.

“How’s your evening going?” The woman stayed behind the register, as if sensing Vi wanted space.

“Fine.” Vi sipped her water until it lay under the cup’s rim. She checked the window again and saw Anise sitting up and panting. She forced a smile at the woman and headed for the door, grabbing a stray pen off an empty table.

Anise strained against her leash at the sound of the door opening. She greeted Vi with her ears down and tail wagging wide. Vi balanced her water cup against the grooves of the iron table and ate quickly. She spread the free poetry open. A poem addressed to “all souls” read:

THE SOUL ASKED THE MIND

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

THE MIND ASKED THE SOUL
WHAT DO YOU WANT?
THE MIND ASKED THE HEART
CAN YOU BE QUIET FOR A SECOND
I AM TRYING TO COUNT.

She needed a new place to stay. She had some money in her bank account, but not a lot. Webb had asked for more and more lately. She'd need to eat tomorrow. Anise had a half bag of dog food left. Should she tell Webb why she was leaving, or write him a letter? Stuck in the flurry of thoughts, the pen in Vi's hand hovered over the paper.

"I thought you could use this," a voice said.

Vi sat up and saw the woman from the register holding a small to-go cup with a black plastic lid.

"Just coffee with a bit of sugar, on me."

Vi's body retracted against the chair. She wasn't used to favors.

"My name is Star," she said. "Well, that wasn't what my parents named me, but that's what I go by now."

Anise walked out from under Vi's legs and sniffed Star. Anise's mouth opened into a pant and she seemed to smile as Star scratched around her collar.

"I know you don't know me, and I don't know you, but I do know that look." Star took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. "I want you to hear me. Leave tomorrow. Leave as soon as you can. Plan one day at a time until you don't have to plan anymore."

Vi trembled, despite the heat. She couldn't meet Star's eyes.

“You can’t trust promises to yourself, so you can promise it to me. I left twenty years ago and I know it isn’t easy. Can I write on this?” She pointed to the free poetry in front of Vi.

“Yes, you can,” Vi said. She watched this stranger write quick words, then long lines. Star handed the paper back.

“Three columns. Things you need to take, things you can sell, and what you’ll need tomorrow. You can do this.”

“Thank you,” Vi whispered. Her throat tightened and her vision blurred.

“Stay strong, and take care of your sweetie there.”

As Star disappeared back into the coffee shop, Vi began filling out the three columns, ignoring the tears trailing down her face.

CHAPTER THREE

A nurse escorted me to the hospital's back parking lot like an impatient bouncer. I wore what I had on the day before, and put my hair on top of my head in a messy bun. Everything was happening so fast, I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be doing. Would the CDC be meeting me somewhere? I glanced at the cars and vans parked along the curve and didn't see anyone that seemed to be looking for me. When I turned to ask the nurse where I should go, she'd already left me. Great. I turned to go back inside when a large woman stepped in front of me.

"Ma'am, the hospital entrance is on the other side."

"I know that, I was just in there. I'm supposed to meet someone out here from—"

"Ma'am, I can't let you do that."

"Do what?" This lady wasn't even making any sense.

"Go back around to the front and someone will be able to assist you."

"I'm not walking all the way around this building." I started coughing. It wasn't on purpose, but I could tell this security lady wasn't buying it. "What, you think I'm wearing this mask for fun?"

"Ma'am, you're disturbing the other patrons here."

"What other people?" I gestured around me. While there were plenty of cars around, there weren't any people floating by who weren't in a hospital uniform.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave," the woman said.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I could feel anger flooding through me. “I’m trying to leave, I have to leave. You don’t even get it.”

“Move along, Ma’am.”

“I’ll fucking move along when I feel like it.” I glared back at her, not breaking her stare.

Then, a van with a large CDC logo and seal on the sliding passenger door pulled up to the curb. It looked as if it’d been refurbished from a rental agency. The front door slammed closed and a six foot stick of a man walked toward me. Underneath his short-sleeve button up shirt, I saw a tattoo on his forearm of Wormhole X-treme, a popular science fiction adventure show. He wore the same round, white mask over his mouth and nose.

“Hi there. I’m Jay.” He leaned his head toward me so I could hear him through the mask.

I gave him a smile that probably looked more like a grimace.

“Are you with this young lady?” The security woman stood next to me, hands on her hips.

“I believe so. Rowen, right?”

I said yes.

“I’m with the CDC.” He jabbed a thumb toward the van.

“It’s on your shirt.” I pointed to the logo stitched across his chest.

He laughed. “I guess they want people to see who we are from any angle.”

We stood facing each other in silence. The security lady went back to her post by the hospital doors.

“Well, Rowen, I’ve been given the honor of escorting you and your lungs to Denver.”

A sense of humor. That was a good sign. Plus, he wasn’t trying to hit on me.

“Everything’s been taken care of, so all we have to do is get you to your place so you can pack up whatever you’d like to take with you. I’ve got your address on my GPS already, so start thinking about what you’d like to take.”

What I wanted to take? I’d only found out my whole life was coming to a screeching halt and this guy wanted me to think about what to put in my suitcase? I wondered if I even had a suitcase. Probably stuffed into the top of my closet.

“Okay, some quick rules for you. First, we’re both going to wear a mask the whole trip. I’ll wear mine, which is technically a respirator. I’ve got extras of your mask in the car, so when yours starts to get wet from condensation or just feels uncomfortable, you can switch it out for a new one. Don’t be afraid to ask, seriously, I’ve got like twenty. Second, I’ve got to keep the back windows open and the air on full blast. This will help flush out any contaminated air and keep me safe. It’ll get a little noisy, but that brings us to the third rule. We’ve got a two-day drive. You’ll sleep at a hospital in St. Louis tonight. I have to stay alert, so I’ve brought tons of good music to listen to. The third rule is: If you’re cool, I’ll let you pick out some of what we listen to. Sound good?”

It sounded terrible. I didn’t want to be there. But, he was trying to be nice. I told him I understood. “Question for you,” I said.

“Yeah?”

“Why don’t we just fly?”

“Oh, you’ve been banned from flying, my friend. Official no-fly list for those lungs.”

As we drove to my studio apartment, I tried to absorb the city as much as I could. I couldn’t believe I was leaving. We sailed down Forbes Avenue. I watched the houses alternate between mansions and apartment buildings: iron gates and courtyards. Overgrown trees swayed between traffic lights, and I wondered if the rings of their gnarled trunks held any ash from the steel mill days. In a few weeks, these streets would be covered in used cars and moving vans as the undergraduate students returned to nearby universities. Restaurants would be full again, and more people my age would come into the Marie Ellen’s clothing store. Leaving, I knew I’d miss my favorite season: when Pittsburgh’s summer loses its intensity and slips into fall. Jay turned down streets with increasingly run-down houses. Paint chipping, shrubs with bald spots, and overflowing recycling bins. This was my neighborhood, where the people who ran the small luxuries of the city slept. Where people who work in clothing stores they can’t afford to shop in make their pasta dinners. I’d been thinking about getting a pet this year, not that I had the means to take care of it, but so I’d feel like I was coming home to something. I guessed that would have to wait.

The van pulled in front of my apartment. From a quick glance, my building looked like a large one-family house. But a closer look showed multiple mailboxes, bikes stacked against the side, and four electric meters growing out of the crumbled stone. I had the studio apartment on the first floor, which was really one long room with a

bathroom. I'd created little dividers with some bookshelves to make it feel like my bedroom and eating area were separate.

"Alright, before we go in I've got a thing for you to sign," Jay said.

I leaned my head back, dizzy from my last coughing spell. "So, what can I even take to this far-away hospital?"

"If you're stalling because your place is a mess, don't worry about it. But to answer your question, you can bring small things to keep in your room like your computer or a sketchbook. Stuff like that. For clothes, you won't need a ton of things to wear: socks, pajamas, comfortable stuff." He handed me a clipboard holding a CDC contract.

"Thanks." I skimmed over the paper, pausing on phrases like "agree to treatment" and "remanded to isolation." I had to sign a contract promising to stay under the new hospital's control until my treatment was complete. This was happening.

"Just sign at the bottom," Jay said.

And I did.

We walked up the cement steps to my front door. I unlocked the door handle; my key wouldn't turn the deadbolt from the outside, so I never locked up that way. As we walked in, I heard the sound of a skateboard jumping over the tectonic plates of the sidewalk.

Inside, the realities of my apartment had grown clearer in my absence. Clothes hung off hangers, and the past two weeks' worth of pajamas huddled on the floor. On every flat surface colorful mugs with tea bags hanging like white surrender flags. I was grateful Jay said nothing as he cleared a couch cushion for himself to sit on.

“I’d love to say ‘take your time,’ but in reality we’ve got about thirty minutes before we should be on the road.” He adjusted his mask against his face. “I’ll sit right here unless there’s anything you need me to do.”

I didn’t blame him. My whole apartment was probably crawling with TB. Except TB didn’t crawl. It hung in the air for days waiting to wiggle into some unsuspecting lungs. Then, it waited for a good time to strike. Maybe that week, maybe years from then. Characteristics include a special coating that makes it hard to kill, a game show array of symptoms, and a tendency to induce denial and general hopelessness in its host. I pulled a small duffel bag down from the top shelf in my closet. I packed underwear, socks, my laptop, all the chargers I’d need, my lucky opal rock I’d found in a thrift store. It still had the “from Australia” sticker on the bottom. I’d never been to Australia. I’d never even been out of the country. As I moved on to my bathroom supplies, I got a text from my aunt.

Aunt Maggie: Talked with a Jay from cdc today.

at work now so can’t say much.

so sorry all this is happening.

What was he doing talking to my aunt? It wasn’t like she was my parent or anything. The more I thought about it, the weirder it seemed. When had Jay talked with her? Why did my aunt wait so long to text me about it?

“Why did you call my aunt?” I stood against the wall outside of my bathroom. Jay leaned against the couch’s arm and turned to face me.

“Because she was listed as your emergency contact?”

I’d had her listed as my contact back in college. I didn’t realize that information had stayed on my records.

“Well, she’s not. She’s not anything.”

“If you’ve got someone else you’d rather have me call I can definitely do that. The CDC needs someone, usually a family member, to act as a point of contact for the patient’s residence, work, that kind of thing.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what”

“That talking about me like I’m not a person thing.”

“What? I—” Jay shifted on the couch. “I’m sorry, Rowen. I didn’t mean to set off any family issues here, I just needed to set up a contact person before I picked you up today. Your diagnosis is one of those emergency-got-to-act-fast things.”

“Yeah, apparently.”

“Is there anything I can do to help make things easier with your family?”

“Well, seeing as I don’t really have one, no.” I thought more about it. Maybe Aunt Maggie could step up a bit. If a TB diagnosis wasn’t enough to kick her maternal instincts into gear, I didn’t know what would. “It’s fine. My aunt will probably be fine.”

I went back into the bathroom and tried to focus on what to bring. I ran through my morning and evening routines. Toothpaste, I’d almost forgotten that. I heard the couch creak, and Jay’s footsteps coming towards the doorway. I pretended I didn’t hear any of it, and stared at my makeup kit.

“I told her about your diagnosis and what it means, and how we can’t really be certain when you’ll be home. Though hopefully it’ll be sooner than later.”

He was quick to add that last thought.

“So she’s going to... what?”

“That’s the thing,” Jay said. “At this point, everything is more of a precaution. Your aunt will get the place cleaned up a bit, pay next month’s rent, and if you’re gone for more than a month, she’ll get in contact with you to make plans for moving your stuff out. Temporarily, of course.”

“Two months, that’s the time to beat?”

“I wouldn’t think of it that way...”

“But that’s a long time. I mean, surely I’ll be better by then.”

“I really can’t say. You know, not a doctor and all of that. Anyway, do you have everything you want to take? Or is there anything I can help you find?”

“I’ll take one last look around.”

“While you do that, I’ll dump what’s in your fridge.”

I knew he was right. I’d hate to find out what month-old leftovers smelled like. I texted Aunt Maggie back.

Thank you, appreciate it.

Jay says you’re taking care of my apartment?

Is there anything I can do?

Aunt Maggie: Nothing yet.

Don't worry about rent, you can pay me
back when you're better. talk to you soon.

I shoved a blank notebook into my bag with a handful of pens. I would have plenty to write about now. Here I was: my whole life in the air, sick with a pretty serious disease, and Aunt Maggie still keeping track of what I was costing her. How would she feel, I wondered, if I turned my back on her if she got cancer or something? But she was helping, technically. It just wasn't the kind of help I'd hoped for. I zipped up my duffel bag and left it by the front door. Jay walked in with a full bag of garbage. It looked like he'd emptied all of the trash cans around my house. I noticed he was wearing blue sterile gloves now.

"I'm ready to go," I said.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, my aunt texted some more." I held up my phone, now silent.

"I take it that didn't go well?"

I laughed. "It's complicated."

As Jay drove onto I-70 toward Ohio, I tied a new mask across my face and tried to settle in for the long drive. I opened a water bottle from the supply crate and forced myself to sip it. Aunt Maggie hadn't sent any more texts. Her new job at the university kept her busy. In some ways, it was her dream. Finally a full-time job, with benefits, and enough money for her to be secure. It was certainly an upgrade from how her life was when I lived with her. It wasn't that I expected her to send me a big envelope of cash

every month, but I thought after five or so years of me not really living in her house or eating her food, she'd be alright with stepping into the mothering role in my time of need. Once again, she'd disappointed me, which only made me disappointed in myself for thinking my aunt could change.

I remembered Thanksgiving break sophomore year—I'd brought my roommate and a guy I was dating to my aunt's house. She knew we were all coming, and said I was always welcome to spend the holidays with her. My cousins, Matt and Melissa, were there. Melissa had her two babies. I knocked on the door, and after warm hugs from everyone, my aunt took me aside and said that due to the babies there just wasn't going to be enough room for us to stay at their house that night. "I think a motel in town might work best for everybody," she'd said.

Now, being a sensible human being, I could see her perspective. She had a full house, two young kids running around, her utility bills would be high, maybe she felt like she just couldn't handle three more people. On the other hand, we were college kids. We'd slept in worse places than a clean, carpeted floor. Besides, wasn't I family? The rest of the night left a sour taste in our mouths as my friends and I were forced to smile, state what we were thankful for, and otherwise feign interest in my family that was happy to kick us out for comfort. All evening I kept eyeing open spots on the floor, the couch, the extra sheets in the closet and wonder about the infinite ways we could have found a place to sleep inside, for eight hours or less. My aunt talked about how grateful she was to "have everyone under one roof for the holidays," and I had to bite my lip and try not to make a face. Between that visit and the build-up of other small instances, it was hard for

me to see our relationship any different: My aunt would be there for me only when I really needed it. And even then, it would be on her terms.

As for my biological father, well, it wasn't like those children's movies, where the hero only has one parent and the story never provides an explanation. Nope. I knew where my dad was. Well, I knew he lived in Maryland somewhere. But other than that, I'd read the court documents from when my mom took him to court for a divorce and to get my child support. He'd acted like such a dick the judge felt compelled to ask, "Would you rather pay child support for your daughter, or go to jail?" And my father, my half-donor of genetics, said he'd rather go to jail.

A notification rang out from my phone.

Aunt Maggie: I've been thinking, and

I've got enough savings to cover a month of your rent.

But, if you need to stay in Denver longer than that,

I think the best thing to do for you and your landlord

would be to move your stuff into a storage locker in Erie.

Your landlord said he can keep the deposit and

let you out of your lease after that.

Me: Okay. I guess that's for the best.

Thank you for the rent, that means a lot to me.

They said my treatment won't cost me anything, but I'm scared
thinking about not being able to work.

Aunt Maggie: Well, worst case scenario,
you can always move back in with me.
Not forever, just until you get back on your feet again.
But one step at a time though. You focus on getting better.
I've got a cleaning crew coming to your apartment tomorrow.
CDC approved.

Me: Oh no need for a cleaning crew, I
might be back soon. I can get it clean again,
really, it's not that bad.

We kept arguing in this nice way until I gave in and agreed to the cleaning crew. I hated putting my mess on other people, almost as much as I disliked my things not being in their proper place. Organization by tornado, that's what my mom used to call it. I knew where everything was, and that's all that mattered. I thought about my cheap furniture and old college textbooks stacked in a storage unit by my Aunt's house. It would be like I was moving back home. It would mean I'd failed in the only goal my teenage-self had set: Move away and do your own thing. I stared out of the van's propped-open window at a saturated blue sky and listened to the air conditioning blast from the vents.

"Why are we taking 70-West?" I asked Jay. "My phone says 80 is an hour faster."

“Well, what your phone doesn’t say is that there’s construction outside Chicago. It was supposed to be done this spring, but, you know. All the apps have it marked as complete, but us drivers know this stuff.”

I nodded so he could see me in the rear view mirror. Outside, the farms we passed got bigger and the space between them spread farther and farther apart. The shell of a barn sat collapsed on one side with a red X spray-painted across the front. Grass turned to corn and then back to grass with white “For Sale” signs shoved into them.

“Can we stop soon?” My need to pee had become urgent.

“Sure,” Jay said. He explained the protocol for stops: I had to keep my mask on at all times. If possible, I should wait until the bathroom was less full, and stay away from other people as much as I could. He would wait for me by the van. If I was done first, I should wait there as well.

“Got it.”

A rest area just off the freeway came into view. Jay signaled, and slowed the van as we curved around the exit’s bend. There were no other cars in front of the building except for a RV type thing parked at the back of the lot.

“Oh, and if anyone asks, I wouldn’t recommend telling them how sick you are. Don’t want to scare them.”

“I’ll tell them I have a flu,” I said.

“That’d work,” Jay said.

He parked the van several spots from the door, got out, and opened the sliding door for me. We both headed inside, him to the left and me to the right. The restroom was

small, two sinks and three stalls. Cobwebs collected in the window and one of the faucets echoed with loud drips.

As I peed, I moved the mask off my face, letting it hang from my neck. It felt so good to breathe fresh air again. I inhaled as deep as I could, only to set up a string of coughing. It felt like I couldn't get air to the bottom of my lungs, like a nervous singer trying to hold the last note of the national anthem. I pulled the mask back up and stood, re-buttoning my shorts. The toilet flushed after me, automatically.

I tried not to look at myself in the mirror, focusing instead on washing my hands and finding the perfect water temperature. I hadn't showered since yesterday, and any amount of water felt like a step towards normal.

Back outside, the sun felt brighter. I must have looked like some demon vampire, squinting against the sun, pale and sick. Jay wasn't at the van yet, so I thought I'd stretch my legs. The RV I'd spotted from the exit ramp looked more like a mini-store. I walked towards it to get a better look. There were signs and stickers covering the side of the vehicle. JESUS SAVES. NOT BAPTIZED? GO TO HELL. ATHEISM IS THE DEVIL. I stopped walking. The man sitting at the counter didn't look too crazy. A long beard, small wire glasses, and a short-sleeve button up shirt. A small sign, dwarfed by all the other ones, advertised free coffee. Wow. Only someone that deep into crazy would think that a bit of free coffee would undo the radical, super-religious signs all around the RV. The whole thing might as well have been a sign saying, "Not exactly like me? Be prepared for a free sermon on how your whole life is wrong!" Putting the situation together in my head, I'd forgotten I'd been staring at this guy the whole time. Of course, with my luck, he'd noticed.

“Now there were four leprous men at the entrance of the gate; and they said to one another, ‘Why do we sit here until we die?’” The man called out across the parking lot.

I couldn’t tell if he was talking to me, so I turned back to the van and pretended to look at something on my shorts.

“You there, the Lord sees all! And a leper came to Him and bowed down before Him, and said, “Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.” Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, ‘I am willing; be cleansed.’ And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.”

“No thanks!” I shouted back. “Not interested.” What was taking Jay so long? Was he taking a sponge bath? I tried the front door of the van, but it was locked. The man stood up, his hands flung out and wide. He was getting into full preacher-mode now.

“Are you willing? The Lord can make you clean. Whatever sins you have committed that have brought this upon you—”

That I’d committed? “Cool, I get it, this is all my fault, huh? You happy now? I’ll put baptizing at the top of my to-do list, right under ‘don’t die.’”

The man stared back at me, then picked up what I assumed was a bible, and began reading to himself. His lips moved, but he wasn’t yelling anymore. My mind was launching into a rant when Jay came back out. He unlocked the car with his remote, and I hurried back into my seat. Jay made his way toward the van, smiling. He swung his door open, hopped up, and buckled in. I tried to look casual.

“Everything alright?” He turned the ignition on, and the van rumbled beneath my feet.

“Yeah.”

“Alright, we’re off. Back on the road.”

We drove through the parking lot, joining up with the entrance ramp. Jay must have sensed I wasn’t in the mood to chat, so he turned on some upbeat music with lots of trumpets in it. As Jay picked up speed, I turned and looked at the strange RV one last time. What an asshole.

Of course people would be weirded out by me. I just hadn’t expected it. I felt stupid realizing that, but it was true. Between the mask, the CDC van, which now that I thought about it, was that safe? Wasn’t that like advertising a super-sick person was in there? I looked sick too, though. I was skinny, and my eyes had bags under them. If I moved as slow as I felt, that probably looked strange too. Maybe I was a leper of some kind. I promised myself I’d be more careful next time. I wouldn’t go walking across a parking lot where anyone could see me. Better to wait behind a tree or something. It was almost midday, and we still had so far to go. I stared out the window, watching the shadows of clouds rise and fall across the world.

“Tell me, Rowen, do you know what’s in Ohio?”

I hoped this wasn’t a set up to a terrible joke. “What?”

“Horizon Chili.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ve never had Horizon Chili?”

“No.”

“Spaghetti chili? Coney dogs? Nothing?”

I hadn’t. Jay’s enthusiasm intrigued me, though. “Can we go for lunch?”

“Already on it.”

The yellow half-sun logo of Horizon Chili hovered in the distance like a promise. It was visible from the freeway a half-mile away. We pulled into the far corner of the parking lot of a one-story brick diner. Through the windows, I could see blue vinyl booth seats and waiters in blue polyester uniforms. The air inside the van smelled like cooked spaghetti. My stomach rumbled.

“I’m going to go in to order for us, and then you can eat while I drive. Very important, you can’t leave the car. It’s a CDC policy. I’ll be ten minutes at most. I’ll get you a small spaghetti chili, I think that’ll be better for you than a hot dog, and how about a pop?”

“That sounds great.” I meant it too. I hadn’t felt this hungry since yesterday.

“Alright, see you soon.” Jay hopped out of the driver’s seat and tape laminated signs to each side of the van. Through the windows, I could read the lettering, backwards from my point of view: **HIGHLY CONTAGIOUS. DO NOT ENTER.**

I watched cars flow onto the freeway exit. I followed them until my eyes couldn’t pinpoint them anymore. Traffic headed west, toward jobs, toward home, toward something. With my phone, I pulled up a map of where we were. I zoomed out until the small blue icon representing the van became a tiny dot in the Midwest. We were halfway through Ohio, and still had to get through Indiana and Illinois before being able to stop for the night. This was the longest road trip I’d ever been on. I only wished it was by choice.

Something moved out of the corner of my eye. A woman my age walked out from behind the base of a billboard, a cigarette pinched in her hand. She squinted at the van.

My first thought was hide, but it was too late. She was curvier than me, her top half busting out of her blue uniform shirt like it had a party to get to. She lifted the cigarette to her mouth, and I noticed a small wedding band. I kept forgetting that people my age were settling into the life that I'd only ever been a by-stander to. Married. I couldn't think of the last time I'd been on a date. Kissing a stranger at a bar didn't count.

The woman walked toward me. I thought she was staring at me, but I figured out from her angle that she was reading the sign. She stepped sideways and saw me. I stared at my phone's screen, pulling up random websites and tapping at whatever.

"Hey," she said.

I took my time looking up, afraid of what she had to say.

"You okay in there?" She blew smoke sideways, away from the van.

"Um, yeah. I mean." I shrugged.

"I mean, you don't need help or anything, right? Not stranded?"

"No, no." I smiled. What a strangely decent person. "The guy who's driving wouldn't stop talking about this chili. But I had to wait here."

"I see. Cool. You have some weird disease or something?"

A bit forward, but I had nothing better to do than hold a conversation with a waitress through a window. "Yeah, I have some weird bug. I have to go stay at a hospital in Denver for a while."

"Gee, that sucks." She frowned.

"It does."

She leaned towards the window, trying to get a better view of me. I turned away, pretending like my phone had alerted me to something. I didn't like this whole caged-animal feeling. If she wanted to stare at something she should go to a zoo.

"Well, my breaks up. But good luck with everything. It sounds pretty rough, but you know, everything happens for a reason." She dropped her cigarette and ground it with her shoe. "Have a safe trip!"

I had to resist rolling my eyes at her psuedo-philosophy. Everything happens for a reason? Really, I couldn't think of any good reason why I had to be this sick. If I needed a quick lesson in gratitude, karma could have given me the flu and I'd be a better person in no time. I sighed. The waitress had been nice though. That's probably all I could hope for at this point.

I watched the waitress wander to a side door, probably an employee entrance. The front door opened and I heard Jay's shoes plod across the parking lot. A large plastic bag filled with take-out containers hung from his left hand. He was smiling and shielding his eyes from the sun with his other hand. He unlocked the van and jumped back into his seat.

"You ready to have your mind blown?"

"It's just spaghetti," I said.

"Um, no. It's not *just* spaghetti. It's amazing. Alright, enough food reviewing from me, here's yours." Jay handed a square container and a set of plastic utensils back to me.

"Thanks. So, what did you get?"

“A bit of everything.” He stacked two containers against the passenger seat and set his cup into the plastic cup holder. “I’ll put your drink in here.” He made a space in the supply crate between several plastic bottles. “Don’t open anything yet. I love this food, but I don’t want to smell it for two days, you know? I’m going to find a safe place where you can take your mask off to eat.”

Aunt Maggie’s car was the opposite of clean. Her passenger side served as a storage closet, art supply, and trash bin for whatever ended up in the car. It wasn’t unusual to find an old apple core by your feet. I learned to never take my shoes off in her car.

We drove on the highway until Jay found a closed truck weigh station. I needed to eat somewhere where there weren’t any people nearby so I wouldn’t infect them. At the stop, Jay opened the van’s sliding door so I could sit on the carpeted floor with my feet on the asphalt. He walked several paces away to sit on the curb. I untied my mask and breathed freely for the first time all day. I imagined all my little germs gathering in the air. I didn’t like that thought.

When I opened the warm container on my lap, a cloud of steam rushed at my face. A huge mound of electric yellow cheese greeted me. Underneath it, a sweet-smelling meat sauce that covered thick spaghetti noodles.

“It’s called a three way,” Jay called out. “Noodles, then sauce, then cheese. You’ve got to get all three layers on your fork.”

It was weird seeing his whole face for the first time. I could see the start of wrinkles and lines on his otherwise young-looking face, kind of like a rock star who could be anywhere from twenty to forty. His smile was as wide and genuine as I’d

imagined it, like a teacher handing back a test they knew you'd studied really hard for. I placed my fork into the edge of the cheese, and pushed through until my fork hit the bottom of the carton. I twirled it, capturing the sauce and cheese. As I moved my mouth closer to my first bite, sauce dripped, and the noodles started slipping out of my fork. I closed my teeth over the lump of sweet and savory spaghetti, and chewed happily. This was the best diner food I'd ever had.

"Is your life forever changed? May I count you as a disciple of Horizon Chili?" Jay laughed through a bite of his cheese-covered hot dog.

"I think so," I yelled between coughs. With my tongue, I hooked a stray noodle and swallowed it down.

Back in the van, I watched the flat landscape shift. Jay bopped along to his punk music. I imagined him reminiscing on his younger days. Maybe he was in a band. I wondered who he was in high school. A member of the chess club's B team? A charismatic athlete? A floater, able to mingle with every group? When we finished eating, Jay turned to small talk.

"So, Rowen, have you travelled much outside of Pittsburgh?"

"Mostly day trips, anything a few hours from Erie."

"Oh, you grew up there?"

I nodded. "I've been working as many hours as I could, so I haven't really thought about traveling anywhere."

"I know what you mean. That's that paycheck to paycheck life. It gets better, though."

I didn't imagine he was making tons of money. Still, it had to be more than my minimum wage.

"I remember this gas station I used to work at. I worked the night shift. There was one other guy going to college, but for everyone else, that was their job. Their only next step would be a different job. I'd go to classes and hear people complain about having too much homework to enjoy Thirsty Thursdays, or how they didn't see the point of their classes, and I'd think, man, these people have no idea. No idea how lucky they are to have a choice."

I leaned forward so he could hear me above the air conditioning. "I saw the same kind of stuff. It used to make me so mad. But then I got too busy and tired to think about how messed up it was anymore."

"Yeah, but we can't ignore that stuff," Jay said. "So, no long road trips or study abroad semesters? I had a cousin who did one of those semester-at-sea deals. I was like, I can get you a bunch of textbooks and we'll sit on a houseboat right here." He laughed.

"More like state parks, camping, that kind of thing. We didn't have a lot of vacation time." I realized he wouldn't know who 'we' referred to. He didn't pick up on it, or, he chose not to push the subject.

We sat without talking for a while. My phone said we were in Indiana, heading toward the center of the state. On my map, it looked like just about every highway crossed through the city. Between Jay making conversation and his strange enthusiasm for chili, I'd been too distracted to think much about why I was on this trip in the first place. I hated not knowing what to expect from this hospital in Denver. But if Jay was any indication, at least the people taking care of me would be nice.

I started seeing billboards for Indianapolis, like car dealerships' end of summer sizzling sales, hotels just outside the city, and home-style food where kids eat free. Jay switched to electronic music, and I let the steady beats carry me over the rivers and skyscrapers and trees of the Indianapolis skyline. We drove past the increasingly close exits for downtown. I imagined all of the life and energy happening there. I could only imagine it, though. We drove past the city, heading southwest, following the sun.

"There's a rest area up ahead. You want to stop?" Jay said, interrupting the daydream atmosphere of the van.

I said I did.

A sign advised five miles until the rest area. Jay tapped his fingers along the steering wheel. We'd been driving since lunch, so he was eager to stop and stretch his back.

"This is the farthest you've been from home, huh?" Jay looked back at me through the rearview mirror.

"The farthest I've ever been."

I stared at the small neighborhoods lining the freeway, lost in thought over what tomorrow would bring. I thought of the last trip I took with my mom.

We drove directly to the falls, not bothering to check in to our hotel until later that night. Bundled up in our scarves, hats, and gloves, we wandered toward the wide sidewalk that lined the river the falls fell into. As we walked along, we ignored the shops advertising fudge, postcards, Canadian maple syrup, and bendable key chains that didn't have my name as an option. The glass windows of each shop fogged with the heat blasting inside, and the snow piled up outside. My mom asked if I could hear it, and like

a switch, I noticed the quiet roar of the falls. The noise had filled the air like crickets do in the summer, where you don't notice them until someone starts talking about them. All around us, families snapped pictures of themselves and the falls. I admired festive hats and beautiful scarves, and hoped one day I would look as glamorous and put-together as some of the women there. My mom noticed me staring. She said sites like this were a great equalizer; no one can roll their eyes and say they have a bigger or better one in their neighborhood. There's only one Niagara Falls, and if you want to see it, you have to stand at that same railing just like everybody else.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Vi got home, she did her best to act normal. She let Webb say his apology, and sat with him while they watched their favorite show. But inside, she was far away already. She didn't notice his hand on her thigh, or hear him when he asked her to turn the volume up. She'd already reached for the remote out of reflex. It was surprising how easy it was to let the shell of herself fulfill all the roles Webb would usually expect from her. She was quiet, sweet, and as far as Webb knew, everything was back in his control.

In the morning, she kissed him goodbye as he left for work. After she locked the door behind him, she sat on the floor holding Anise for ten full minutes. She had to make sure he didn't forget anything before he drove away. She sat cross-legged, then sprawled her legs to the side. She stretched, leaning toward one foot than another. Anise licked her bare toes, and for once Vi let her. When the ten minutes were up, Vi transformed. Energy shot through her, pumping her heart fast as she tossed her things into backpacks and grocery bags. She only owned one proper suitcase, the same one she'd used to move in with Webb long ago.

She loaded the most important things into the car first: Anise, dog items, computer. Another trip up the stairs and into the apartment she hoped to never see again for her clothes and food that didn't need to be refrigerated. She also grabbed her bathroom things—surely Webb wouldn't be mad about her taking her own razor and hair products.

Vi didn't stop to think about what any of this meant until she got in the car. Anise smiled and panted at her from the passenger seat. She'd always liked car rides. Vi stared straight ahead, glimpses of her things stacked haphazardly through the rear view mirror. She held the car keys in her hand. All she needed to do was start the engine and go. Anise turned and put her front paws up onto the window, ready.

"Maybe I should tell him," Vi said. "Do you think he'll be mad? He's done a lot for me, and for you." She thought about the times he'd woken up early, and taken Anise for a walk so that Vi could sleep in a bit. Or, on her twenty-sixth birthday, when he made her French toast—he knew she liked that better than pancakes—with chocolate chips shaped in a 'V' with a heart around them. Then, the other memories swept into Vi and her body shook as if the temperature had dropped without warning. Anise whined.

She pushed the key in and pressed the start button. The car hummed. The center console screen greeted her. Vi tapped her finger on the map icon where a red arrow indicated her location. She zoomed out on the map. Heading south made sense to her, so she selected the closest city, Indianapolis, as her destination. Plus, she didn't know anyone there. Not even from her former life.

Vi felt like someone was stepping on her chest with an industrial work boot as a flock of questions crowded her mind. Where would she sleep tonight? How much food could she get with the little money she had? What if the car broke down? What if something happened to Anise, and they needed to go to the vet? Lurking beneath all of these questions was the big question: *How can I get more cash?*

Vi visualized her belongings, now in a heap in the backseat of her car. There wasn't much she could part with. She'd only taken what she'd needed. The simplicity of

the answer lit inside her a fire of possibilities. She realized she hadn't taken anything to sell. The list the woman at the coffee shop had made was somewhere in her suitcase. Not that she'd been able to finish filling it out. She turned the car off, folded the keys back into her hand, and stepped out of the car. Her heart pounded so loud she wondered if it could be heard outside of her body. Back up the stairs, she unlocked the front door and began scanning the room for things that had value. Webb had never owned expensive things, but Vi figured selling enough small things might add up to enough to be of help to her.

In the kitchen, she took the Crock-pot they never used. With the lid popped open, she filled the pot with an old cell phone, a dust-covered handheld video game player, and some gold cufflinks Webb won at one of his last jobs. He didn't own a suit jacket anymore, so she figured he wouldn't miss them. Vi took one last look through their bedroom closet and found a power drill set. With the stuffed Crock-pot in one hand and the handle of the drill set in her other, she locked up the apartment one last time.

Back at the car, Vi emptied the Crock-pot and shoved all her finds into the trunk. She looked around the street to see if anyone was watching her, but she saw only the pigeons pecking at the trash bins across the street. In the driver's seat, Vi clicked her seatbelt in and took a deep breath. Vi held the key ring out to Anise. The dog licked the metal apartment key obsessively, then turned back to the window again. "I really don't know why you think metal tastes good."

She turned the car on, and plugged her new location into the console's map. The directions lit up and Vi followed the red line out of her neighborhood and towards the ramp to her new life. It was only once they were on the freeway that the burden of taking

so much action in one morning finally reached Vi. But she was too scared to pull over. She decided she couldn't stop until she was officially in the next state.

"Welcome to Indiana, Crossroads of America!" The sign guided her across land that otherwise looked the same.

Vi exited the freeway before the downtown limits. In an empty parking lot, she searched for cheap motels on the center console. Small yellow price marker icons popped up over a map. She didn't know how long she would stay, but after reading through a few of the motel's descriptions, she realized it would cost her less per day to agree to a full week at one of these motels. The Sunset Motel was out of the way, miles from the freeway exit, and not next to any motels or businesses that looked unwelcoming. Vi didn't want to be noticed. She wanted to disappear for a while, until she figured out her next move.

She drove to the Sunset Motel, winding between flat streets, and houses with deep front yards. The motel reminded her of a toy set she played with when she was little. The building was long and narrow, surrounded by a wide lot of asphalt and parking. With wooden siding and floral curtains hanging in each window, it looked like twelve small cabins smashed together. The motel's office sat on the far right, with a larger window than the other rooms. Vi parked the car, double-checked her bank account on her phone, then headed inside with Anise in tow.

The room was sparse and the ceiling short, giving the impression that a giant had pushed his hand down on top of the whole room. Anise sniffed at a lone fake tree in a

clay pot while Vi edged toward the formica counter. Before she could reach the bell, a tall Chinese man with a bed of combed-over hair stepped out.

“How long?”

“I’m sorry?” Vi wrapped Anise’s leash around her hand, shortening it.

“How long you need to stay?”

“It’s cheaper to stay a week, right?”

“That’s right.” The man typed something into his computer. His nametag said JIM and OWNER written underneath.

“And I have a dog. She’s small though.”

“Twenty dollars extra for a dog.”

Vi nodded. The man totaled up her week’s stay and showed her the number. She gave him her card, and her driver’s license. He studied both before swiping. When the transaction went through, the man cracked a smile.

“Great! Okay, two rules for Sunset Motel. First, no funny business. Second, no loud music. Everything else is your business.” He bent down, and retrieved a small key attached to a metal ring with the number 4 inscribed on a plastic card.

“I won’t be any trouble,” Vi said. She picked up the key, and, unable to fit it into her pockets, looped her fingers around it. “Thank you.”

“Oh and breakfast at six. Once the food runs out, I won’t put out more. So, come early.”

As Vi headed back to her car, she wondered about the man. What was his story? How long had he run the motel?

“I think as long as our card runs, he’ll be fine with us, right Anise?”

The dog panted, happy to be out of the car. Vi pulled her suitcase and the dog supply bag out of the car and unlocked room number four. Anise ate dinner, crunching her kibble.

It might have been easier to be on the run without Anise, but the thought of being truly alone was something she couldn't afford to attempt. With the sun setting, and her necessities out of the car, Vi was done. She curled under the sheets, and fell asleep with the TV on.

The next day, she didn't want to get dressed, let alone go outside. The light from the front office shone like a spotlight coming sideways toward her window. For what little she had, and what little she knew about her future, she did feel safe. Vi kept the curtains drawn, and besides taking Anise out to do her business and waking up at six to grab food from the motel's breakfast table before anyone else woke up, they both stayed inside the room.

By the end of the first week, Vi had found small, one-time jobs online. Enough to stay a second week. She already knew her room all too well: the peeling floral wallpaper, the crack in the tub that she'd sliced her toe on while trying to shave her legs. She knew the locked door handle, the deadbolt, and the sliding chain. It was Saturday, the first one she'd had all to herself in a long time. Vi woke at seven, Anise standing on her chest whining to eat breakfast and go outside. She turned on the lights, took care of the dog, and walked over to the front office to secure her second week. It felt strange, having a place of her own. In her small, run-down room, she set the rules. Vi watched whatever she wanted on TV, washed her hair when she felt like it, and no longer cared whether she

changed out of her pajamas by noon. She turned the TV on to an animal channel to entertain Anise, and walked over to the front office.

The same man stood at the front desk, keeping an eye on the breakfast table—A small buffet of bread, muffins, and fruit against the far wall. A TV mounted to the wall played the local news. Vi caught the end of a story about a local salon offering free haircuts to people trying to find jobs.

“Can I help you?” The man called out to her.

“Sorry, yes. I wanted to stay another week.” She moved towards the counter, and leaned her arms against it.

“No problem. Same price.”

Vi produced her card and slid it toward him.

“Room working out?”

“Yep, it’s fine. Everything we need.”

“We?” The man raised his eyebrow.

“My dog. Me and my dog.”

“That’s right.” He ran her card through the machine and gave it back to her.

“Great. Well, stay as long as you like. Have some breakfast, it’s good for you.”

“Thank you,” Vi said. “Hopefully I’ll be back here next week.”

The man smiled, then turned his attention back to his computer. Vi loaded up a paper plate with packets of peanut butter, bread, muffins, and bananas. A commercial for a luxury car filtered through the air. Vi stacked another paper plate on top of her hoard and headed out the door.

Back in her room, Vi munched on the bread she'd hoarded from the free breakfast and sat down to one of the online gigs she'd signed up for, searching terms and recording what she found. Companies scrambled to anticipate what people wanted to buy, so Vi was one of many people being paid to fake-search and fake-shop. Within an hour, she was bored and her eyes burned. Anise slept on her foot, nose dripping onto the carpet.

“Should we go?”

Anise turned her head sideways.

“Out—?”

She turned her head the other way.

“Side?”

The dog spun clockwise, barking, and ran toward the door.

“Okay hang on.” Vi snapped the collar around the mane of white fur hanging from the dog's neck. Vi felt for the tags along the collar and hooked the leash in place. She ran through her mental checklist of what to take. Hotel key, back pocket. Phone, front pocket. Water bottle. Bags for Anise. She checked her hair in the faded mirror. Her dark eyes seemed more sunken than usual, and her skin looked cold and almost ashy. She peeled a piece of dead skin from her nose. With her long hair pulled into a low ponytail, Vi wished she had a hat so she could feel more hidden. That might be something to pick up when she had a bit more money. Anise barked anxiously. Vi pulled the ends of her purple long-sleeve shirt down. She didn't even like this shirt, but she wanted to wear something clean.

The sun stung her eyes, but Anise seemed energized by it, pulling the leash taut. It was weird, not hearing from Webb. She expected him to text her, or send her a message.

She'd been careful not to have any kind of online presence. No pictures, no check ins, not acknowledging other people's posts. The only way to escape was to temporarily disappear. In a way, she was pleasantly surprised with how well Webb seemed to be taking things. Maybe she hadn't meant as much to him as she thought. This insight cast a shadow on her outing, and Anise seemed to sense this. Vi turned back toward the door and Anise barked in protest.

"Anise, come on. Don't be a brat."

The dog jumped, bouncing off her legs. Anise led the way, walking toward the road.

She knew she hadn't been giving Anise her normal exercise routine. And though the dog was usually calm, Anise was in puppy-form today.

"Alright, crazy dog, you want to go for a walk?"

Anise spun in circles on the leash, tangling her paws around the brown leather. Vi laughed, picking the dog up briefly to free her legs. She let Anise tug her to the left, down the road from the Sunset Motel.

It took a bit, but Vi began to relax. She noticed the trees in full bloom with large green leaves. The sky felt wide with see-through clouds. In the air, the faint smell of fire, someone enjoying a barbecue. They walked along broken sidewalks, watching for sudden upheavals of cement waiting to trip them. The buildings grew taller and more frequent. They passed a diner full of people. It was almost lunchtime. Vi beckoned Anise across a street so they could take a different route home. Up a few streets, then returning to the right to start the long loop back to the room. They passed a few one-story metal buildings, a Laundromat, and even another motel. A bright orange logo MOTEL 23 soared

above the two-story building. As they walked by the door to the front office, Vi admired the orange carpet inside, continuing the color theme of the logo. Then she noticed a figure inside, leaning across the front counter. He was as tall as Webb, wearing pants that could be his. The hair was a little shorter. He turned to the side, looking at something in the lobby. Vi's stomach cramped. It was Webb.

Vi ran.

Anise's collar jingled with every step. A woman pulling a two-wheel metal grocery cart stared after her. Vi kept running. Up to the next street then left and down, until she was sure he wouldn't be able to see her if he walked outside the motel. Anise's chest heaved, her ears back. Runs on a leash were not something she normally did. Vi's whole chest hurt and she found herself unable to take a full breath. They slowed to a walk, Anise pressing her nose to Vi's leg as if checking that her owner was still alive.

Was it Webb? Or had she imagined his face? Of course she was going to imagine him every where. That seemed like a normal reaction. But this was Webb, this was the guy who made her delete all her male phone contacts. Someone who randomly came home for his lunch break, just to check on her. Like she would be anywhere else. But Vi had been somewhere else the day she'd left. She imagined him coming home, seeing her car gone, checking her favorite take-out restaurants, the park where she used to walk Anise. There was no reason the guy she saw couldn't have been Webb. She talked to herself quietly as she pulled Anise along. Their motel sat on the horizon of her vision. "Of course it wouldn't be this easy. What was I thinking? If he was in that motel..." As soon as she spoke this out loud, she knew it to be true. "He's searching for us, Anise. I just know it. We've got to get back. I just hope he hasn't tried our motel first."

As they approached their run-down Sunset Motel, Vi traced their route with her eyes. She'd parked her car only two spots from their room. At the time, it seemed convenient, but now it felt like a mistake. Vi needed to think like someone was after her. As she snuck behind the shining cylinders of fourteen-wheeler trucks, she made her way to the front office. Before she pushed the door open, Vi took three deep breaths, and reminded herself to stay calm.

"Hello, Ms. Vi. Ready for a third week so soon?" The front desk man greeted her with a smile.

"No." Vi paused, too long. Anise whined. The man's eyes narrowed. "I mean, um, I wanted to see, I need to ask you..."

"What's the matter?" The man's voice became low, like a disapproving father's.

Vi laughed, then stopped. She was doing this all wrong. She needed to be smooth, to slide out of this situation. She just needed to know how much time she had—a lot, or none.

"There's someone, a friend, who I was going to meet up with. And I was wondering if maybe he'd stopped by here? I forgot to tell him my room number."

"Oh no," the man said. "No, I told you no trouble. I don't want any trouble."

Blood flushed through her face, but she had to soldier on. She needed to know if Webb had tried this motel yet. "You're saying no one's been in here?"

"No one."

The two stood facing one another, Vi trying to look relaxed and unconcerned, and the man trying to look as authoritative as possible. Anise, oblivious, sat down and

scratched at her collar. Vi tried to resist it, but she found herself turning and sneaking a glance at the parking lot. No Webb. Not yet.

“Would it be possible to get a partial refund on the second week? I know I just paid, so if you needed to keep a day or two I’d understand.”

“No refunds.” The man pointed to a small wooden sign propped up on the desk. Vi had seen it, of course, but it hadn’t been a factor until now.

“Please?” She hated herself for asking. She sounded so weak. She was losing control. “I really need the money.”

“Everybody’s got a sob story,” the man said. He reached into his back pocket, fumbled with something, and threw a twenty-dollar bill on the counter. “Your dog deposit.”

“I have to leave,” she said, as if this could explain her changed mind.

“So get out.”

Vi barely remembered running to the door, dragging Anise behind her. The twenty-dollar bill crumpled in her pocket. Vi scanned the parking lot, but there was still no sign of him or his car.

Vi shortened Anise’s leash and darted into the shadowed doorways along the front of the motel rooms. Only a few doors to go. Her feet wanted to run, but she knew she should draw as little attention as possible. Finally, she slid the key in, out, then locked the door behind them. Anise gulped water from her bowl and Vi pushed the sweat on her forehead back into her hair.

Vi put everything into bags. Pack up, get out. She looked out the window. All clear. The bags went into the backseat, slumped sideways and upside-down. She could organize later. Anise waited in the front seat. Vi double checked the room. Outlets empty, shower empty, under the beds, empty. She left the key on table, and walked away from the last four days of rent, no refunds.

Vi drove out the back entrance. The car guided her through the city, and out to the suburbs. Outside, the weather looked the opposite of how Vi felt. The sun beat down onto the roof of the car. People driving past her were happy, going to lunch, leaving for vacation. Or at least that's what Vi felt. It was hard to imagine other people having problems when her own problems dictated her very movement.

She pulled into a shopping area, parked the car under the shade of a maple tree, and spread the list from the coffee shop woman across the steering wheel. "What do we do now?" she said. Anise ran her nose across the window, smearing the glass. They could stay somewhere else in Indianapolis, but she'd still be worrying about Webb. It really wasn't that far away from where he lived, especially if he was determined. She tapped at the car's center console screen, and opened up the GPS app. She zoomed out from her location. Indianapolis, then Indiana, and then the Midwest. Why stop there? She widened the map until she could see both oceans on either side of the country. "You know, if we're really doing this, we should go. Really go. Anise, we could go anywhere. You and I haven't been on a vacation in a long time." Vi tapped the screen, zooming in and out. "Let's keep going south. We'll chase the warm weather." She saved Nashville as their next destination, and turned off the console screen.

Vi thought through the things she might sell: The cufflinks, the drill set, the video game console, the Crock-pot. She wished she had other gold to sell. She got out of the car and rummaged through her luggage. Her other shoes were too worn to be worth anything. What little clothes she had she would need. None of Anise's stuff was on the line, since she used her things every day. Vi opened the small makeup bags she'd taken. The first one contained small cases of blush and eye shadow. One of the peach blush pots had broken in half, the powder covering the plastic case. She opened the next bag and her eyes lit up. Tangled between some plastic bracelets was the necklace Webb gave her for their one-year anniversary. Small diamonds clustered onto a star-shaped pendant on a gold chain. She hadn't worn it in a long time. When Webb gave it to her, she thought he was changing. Instead, he brought it up during fights for the rest of that year. "Maybe it'd be good for me to sell this anyways," she said to herself. Hopefully, all of that would be enough to get her to Tennessee. She could figure out what she wanted to do after that.

The Pawn 2000 building looked like a concrete box sitting inside a jail. Bright lights advertised that week's sales and what the store looked to buy: GOLD, GOLD, GUNS! Vi parked and put Anise's leash on. With the leash in one hand, Vi placed the cufflinks, old phone, and handheld video game player into her pockets. She undid a kink in the necklace and laid it flat inside the makeup bag before placing it into her back pocket. She decided to bring the drill set in first, and ask if they'd be interested in cooking wares before she bothered bringing the Crock-pot in.

Inside, an electronic bell announced their entrance. Framed items, posters, and certificates covered every available space on the cinder block walls. An old pinball machine with a scratched up glass cover sat ignored, the "no tilt" light permanently on.

Industrial shelves lined the floors creating narrow walkways for browsers to discover things they needed, or things they didn't yet know they needed. A woman with a trench coat tied tight despite the weather held a martini-shaped fishbowl to the light. A man with spherical arms like a wrestler long past his prime marched through a row of antique bank lamps.

Vi stood at the wooden bar table at the rear of the store. Anise sniffed at the floor and the bar paneling.

"Buying or selling?" A voice said from behind the wall.

"Selling," Vi said.

"Outright or pawn?"

"Whichever one gets me more cash," she said.

A large man wearing a Hawaiian shirt and a silver and turquoise cuff came around the wall. His hands looked like bread rising, and he spread them wide across the counter as if to say, no tricks here.

"What have you got for me?"

Vi hoisted the drill set up onto the counter. The man seemed familiar with the brand, and smiled. Next, Vi laid out the cufflinks, phone, and the video game player.

"These sell quick," the man said. He reached for the video game player, blowing dust off the top of it. He marked numbers onto a note pad for each item. "These cufflinks, are they gold?"

"I think so."

From somewhere under the counter, the man produced a small magnet covered in tape. The cufflinks jumped up from the counter and hung from the magnet.

“Bad news for you,” the man said.

“What’s that?”

“Gold isn’t magnetic. I’ll give you a few dollars for them, since they’re in good shape.”

Dammit, Vi thought. She’d been certain they were real gold. *Cufflinks for laundry money*. She shifted her weight, pressing one foot on top of the other. A scuff on her left shoe caught her eye, but when she tried to use her other shoe to rub it off, the scuff grew bigger.

“Give you thirty for the drill set, a few bucks for the phone and the cufflinks, and that console thing.” The man thought, and pressed more numbers into his calculator. “I’ll give you fifty.”

Vi smiled. Webb’s impulse buy of that game system years ago had turned out in her favor after all.

“I have a Crock-pot in my car, never used. Would you take that?”

“Do you have the box?”

“No,” Vi said.

“I can’t give you much for it. You’d probably be better off selling it online, you know, some local forum type thing. Kitchenwares do better there.”

Vi thanked him for the advice, though she wasn’t sure whether to trust him. Then again, why should this man trust her word that she hadn’t used it?

“Got anything else you want me to look at?” The man moved the sold items to the side.

Vi let Anise's leash drop to her wrist while she produced the makeup bag she'd stuffed in her back pocket. The man unzipped the bag and plucked the necklace out. Vi was surprised his fingers could close on something so delicate.

"These diamonds?"

"Yes."

"Alright if I look at these more carefully?"

Vi nodded. She started guessing how much he'd offer. Was she allowed to negotiate? Two hundred would be alright. The man dropped into a chair and held the necklace under different machines and magnifying glasses. He shone light through each stone. Maybe one hundred, one hundred was the minimum she'd want.

"Give you twenty bucks."

"What?" She hadn't expected a generous amount, but this was far from that.

"That's my best offer."

"How about fifty?"

The man laughed. "No, look, this is worth maybe twenty-five. I'm offering you twenty since I've got to make something off it too. You're welcome to try some other places, but I doubt they'd offer you more." He held the necklace up in the air. "Probably offer you less."

"Is there something wrong with it? I really need more than that."

"I mean, other than the diamonds being fairly standard and small, no, there's nothing wrong with it." The man hesitated. "Probably got it from a big department store or something right?"

"Probably," Vi said.

The two stood facing each other, neither saying a word. Vi felt angry. Not at the pawn shop man, but at everyone. Why wasn't a diamond necklace worth anything? If what she had was worth twenty, what would two hundred look like? With the money she'd lost from leaving the motel early, she couldn't stay anywhere else for more than two nights.

"What am I supposed to do?" Vi directed this more to herself than the man.

"I don't know. Those kind of questions I usually point people down the road to the tarot reader." The man chuckled at his own joke. "Look, I can't do anything more about the necklace. The thing to know is there's a difference between what we call retail value and selling value. Like, you *could* sell that necklace for two hundred or whatever you paid for it. But why would someone buy that from you when they could go to the mall and get the same necklace in a brand new box, "on sale" for one seventy. See? So, the materials in this thing are worth twenty, because that's what I can get for their weight. Doesn't matter if its pretty or in style or whatever."

Vi remembered when Webb gave her the necklace. She'd been hoping for some kind of jewelry from him. Not a ring, at least not in that sense. But something she could wear as a marker, letting the world know that someone loved her that much. She liked the idea of her body displaying love. Webb hung the necklace around her, but his fingers fumbled with the clasp. She'd pulled it around so the clasp hung under her collar bone, and closed it around herself.

"If you're looking for cash, one of my regulars told me about some research thing. You know, like companies needing to test something or they want a bunch of opinions. Let me get the card." The man walked behind the wall.

“That’s okay, I’ll take the twenty.” She called out over the counter.

Drawers opened, closed. Keys shook. The man returned. “Be sure to mention his name so he gets his kickback, if you get picked. His name is Kelly.”

Anise pulled toward a customer carrying a plastic bag of takeout food. Vi held the leash tight and commanded Anise back. “It’s fine, really. I’ll be okay.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. But Kelly’s legit. He doesn’t dabble in anything too strange. The research stuff is a good gig if you can get a lead into it. You can even do some of it online.”

“Remotely?”

“Sure. From the comfort of your pajamas at home.”

Vi took the business card and read the text. “Thank you Mr.—”

“Just Cas.”

Vi nodded.

“Well, here’s what I owe you for everything. You both be safe out there.”

Vi folded the bills in half and put them into her front pocket.

“If you want, there’s some nice jewelry over there.” He pointed down one of the shelf aisles. “Some antique things, turquoise, nice chains.”

“That’s okay. Thank you though.”

Cas shrugged, and put the necklace into a small cardboard box that jingled with the sound of other people’s hard decisions. “Can’t blame a guy for trying.”

Outside, Vi read the card again. CONSUMER RESEARCH INDIANA, FOR ALL YOUR RESEARCH NEEDS. It looked decent. No promises of riches, no signs of anything bad. It couldn’t hurt to check it out. She could plug the address into her car’s map. Vi opened the

passenger-side door, and Anise bounded back into her seat. When Vi settled back into her seat, she looked back at the front of Pawn 2000. Behind the glass doorway, a knee-high black Japanese maneki-neko cat waved goodbye with its automatic arm, its black eyes staring straight past her.

CHAPTER FIVE

Between the car's air vents pumping, and the tires rumbling along the freeway, and Jay's music droning along like a heartbeat, I fell asleep. It must have been several hours. I woke to that feeling of falling, which turned out to be Jay slamming on the brakes to avoid a large white SUV cutting in front of the van. Cars sat nose to nose as far as I could see. Each lane looked like its own line of worker ants, just trying to get back to home base.

"Where are we?" I leaned forward and tapped Jay's shoulder.

"Huh? Oh, sorry, you're awake?"

How could I not be after that test of my seatbelt reaction? "Um, yeah, I'm wide awake now," I said.

Jay didn't pick up on my annoyance. He shifted in his seat like a cat waiting for dinner. He sat up, looked over and around the traffic lines, and checked his phone. Whatever his phone showed, it wasn't good. He threw the phone back into a cup holder and swore to himself.

"Is everything okay?" Normally, I hated asking obvious questions like these, but Jay wasn't giving me much choice.

"Well, it's just not ideal." Jay forced a smile, the edges of his mask moving. "I'm supposed to get you to St. Louis by seven. But at this rate, who knows."

I wondered why that mattered. It wasn't like my TB was going anywhere. We'd arrive when we'd arrive, at least that's how I saw it. "Is this rush hour traffic?"

“No, that’s the thing. It shouldn’t be. I think there’s an accident up there.” Jay stretched his neck as high as it could go, trying to see above the SUV. “But I can’t tell yet.”

I checked my phone. One text from Vanessa, wanting to know what I was up to. I ignored it. The traffic inched forward around us. Some of the nearby drivers stared at the van, trying to see if anyone was inside. I was halfway to my isolation life. If only the ride could take forever. I drank some water and fell back asleep to the sounds of horns honking and the air-conditioning blowing. My dreams were dark, full of corners and thoughts I’d been pushing away the whole trip.

When Jay pulled into the hospital parking lot in St. Louis, it was pitch dark outside. We changed masks and headed inside. I was so tired that I didn’t remember being wheeled to my room. The nurses muttered to each other about masks and keeping me away from everyone. “The less contact the better.” I wanted to tell them I was still in there, in my body, and in my lungs. Instead, I coughed behind my mask and accepted the sterile back pats they gave me.

In a small room with an open window, the nurses helped me into the bed. They pointed out a hospital gown for me to change into, but I was too tired. They didn’t press the issue. By the dim light of a small clip-on lamp, I watched them rushing. They were itching to get away from me, I could tell.

“Where’s Jay?” I was so tired, my words came out slurred together. Where had he gone so quick? I remembered getting out of the van, and then nothing. He couldn’t even make sure I was okay?

“He’s at a hotel nearby, he’ll come pick you back up tomorrow morning.

Alright?”

“Alright.” It was probably good for him, to get a break from watching me. At least the air would be clear over there.

The nurses told me to ring the call button on my bed if I needed anything. They hurried out the door. The air from the window felt like cool mint. I turned off the lamp, and curled down into the bed.

The smell of toast and eggs startled me awake. I hadn’t even heard the door open. A nurse waived good morning and gestured toward the tray before closing the door behind her. Another day, another person who didn’t want to be too close to me.

I ate slowly, trying to ignore the gritty feel of my teeth. I hadn’t brushed them the night before. Hygiene had been the last thing on my mind. My phone lit up with a notification. It wanted to know if I wanted to change my default city location. I knew it should be Denver, but I wasn’t ready to make that commitment yet. The breakfast smelled better than it tasted. I left half of the eggs spread across the plate, stood, and went into the small bathroom. A travel toothbrush and tiny toothpaste hung from a plastic bag on the towel bar. When I finished brushing, and washing my face as best I could with the liquid soap, I noticed something next to the foot of the bed. My suitcase. Someone must have brought it up from Jay’s car. I unzipped it, and put on clean clothes. In the mirror, I almost looked like myself, my cheeks still pink from the hot water.

A knock at the door. “Rowen, you awake?”

It was Jay. I scrambled for a mask, and found a small pile of three stacked on top of the hospital gown I hadn't worn.

"Yeah, I'm up."

He opened the door and walked inside.

"How was the hotel?"

Jay turned his head, confused. "Fine? Did you get some sleep?"

"Yeah, fell asleep in my clothes."

"And you've eaten?" He looked at my mess of a breakfast tray. "Good, okay. Well, we should get going. Another long day, I'm afraid."

"Do you do this a lot? Shuttling someone across the country?"

"Not very often, why?"

"I was just wondering." I knelt by my suitcase, and zipped it closed.

"Rowen, I feel like something is bothering you. I know you've had a weird past few days, but it's almost over. All we've got to do is another day of driving and then you'll start getting the best possible treatment. It's the best thing that could happen right now."

"Did you get out of the van?"

"What do you mean?"

"Last night, when we got here. Did you get out? Or were you so happy to get rid of me that you rushed off to your fancy hotel."

Jay let out a sad laugh. "I assure you, it wasn't fancy. The hospital here was eager to get you situated. You weren't in a good state at all. I don't know how much you even

remember of coming in. But, if you really want to know, I waited downstairs in the lobby until I knew what room you got.”

I hadn’t expected that. I told myself to stop being so paranoid. I couldn’t afford to lose any allies right now, even if Jay was just doing his job. “Oh. I see.”

“Oh?” His eyebrow rose up, like a teacher who knows you’re bullshitting.

I picked my suitcase up and leaned it against the bed. “I’m sorry. I don’t know. I—”

“I know you’re not feeling good. And not just because of the TB. Jay walked closer and took the suitcase out of my hand. “Let me carry that. You okay to walk?”

I could feel my face blushing. It seemed like anytime I thought I was all grownup, something from my teenage years would slip out and spill all over the mirage. “I can walk. Probably should before I sit all day.”

I followed Jay to the nurses’ station on the floor. We let them know we were leaving, and their faces were suddenly ten years younger. What a relief it must have been to get me out of there. Outside, Jay started up the van and met me at the curb. Back on the freeway, whatever energy I had after breakfast was gone. I felt distant, like I was on Mars and my body was left on Earth to disintegrate into a pile of skin and lungs. Nothing felt real. If the Mars thing were true though, what would I do up there? Sell clothes to Martians? Offer to be someone’s intern? The truth was, my presence wouldn’t be missed. Not in Pittsburgh, and not on Earth. I fell asleep lying down in the backseat the rest of the morning. It was like my body knew where it was heading and wanted to avoid reality for as long as possible.

Midday, Jay woke me up at a rest stop somewhere in Kansas. I'd always pictured dust-covered farms. Wherever we were was green and dotted with suburbs. My feet tingled with pins and needles, and I shook them awake. Jay got out and opened the door for me.

"You alright?"

I mumbled that I was fine, and didn't need any help.

"I already went. Meet you back here when you're ready?"

I pushed my mask against my face, checking the edges, and nodded yes.

The rest stop building looked like the kind of house a retired person would have a porcelain figure of. I walked up to a bright white house-looking building with a red roof. Flowers in all shades of pink sprouted up in a large circle outside the door. I shielded my eyes against the sun and opened the door.

A few families were looking at maps and brochures against a wall. The vending machines hummed and the fluorescent lights made everything look yellowed and old. One of the fathers caught sight of my face and my mask and cast a strange look my way. I hurried into the open doorway marked WOMEN.

I pressed against a door that looked closed, but it swung open into the stall. On a closer look, dark hairs were scattered across the seat. I stepped backwards, and checked the next stall. Open, and clean. After I was done, I washed my hands and was wiping the sleep out of the corners of my eyes when a woman holding a young boy's hand walked in.

"I think you do need to go. So, we're going to try, okay?"

The boy nodded, and picked up his feet slowly.

Then, she saw me. Her face turned from a smile into the face someone might make when they found gum stuck to the bottom of their shoe. Her eyes narrowed, and she tugged the boy closer to her, as if by instinct.

“What’s wrong with her, Mom?” The boy pointed at me with a chubby, pink finger.

“She’s a very sick person who shouldn’t be outside.” She paused to give herself time to glare at me before stomping further down the line of stalls.

Their footsteps sounded like they’d gone to the farthest stall away from me as possible. As I pulled paper towels to dry my hands, I heard the mom reminding her son that germs are “dirty-dirty” and not to go near people like me.

Part of me wanted to yell down the stalls, and let my words echo on top of each other until the mom heard me loud and clear. I didn’t want to be there. I didn’t want to be anywhere. Even sick people needed to pee. There was nothing I could do about my situation except keep moving my body closer to Denver. I hoped that the mom would treat her son better if he ever looked visibly ill and she had to take him out in public. The other part of me wanted to store all that anger in my stomach and walk out to the van like nothing had happened.

Back at the van, Jay handed me a white paper bag heavy with food. It turned out he had already stopped for lunch and bought me a butternut squash soup and grilled cheese sandwich. I’d mentioned this as my favorite soup and sandwich combo the day before. I sat at the farthest picnic table from the rest stop building until I’d finished eating. Little doomsday thoughts kept seeping through, like hoping the hospital food would be good, then knowing somehow that it wouldn’t be. I thought about how little

freedom I'd have. Then, I reminded myself that until a few days ago, the most I'd known about hospitals had come from TV. Be in the moment. That was the kind of pseudo-motivational mantra I clung to. I told myself to think about the sandwich, and how the cheese was melted without getting too stringy. The soup had that savory and sweet balance going for it. There were things to be grateful for. I didn't believe it, but I felt like I should.

Back on the road, Jay tried to start a conversation. "Did something happen in there?"

I stared out the window. "It's fine."

"Clearly, it's not, or I wouldn't have noticed anything." He turned the music down to make his point even clearer.

I told him some lady was giving me trouble in the bathroom, being passive aggressive like I was trying to hurt her kid.

Jay shook his head. "I'm sorry that happened to you. We've taken as many precautions as possible, but there's no better way to move you half-way across the country."

"I know," I said.

"Did she reach for a giant bottle of hand sanitizer after?"

I laughed. "No, thankfully."

"You know, this hospital stay is a good thing. Imagine if you had to stay in Pittsburgh."

Don't make me homesick, I thought.

“You wouldn’t be able to work, to see your friends, none of that. Meanwhile you’d probably want to keep your apartment. It would end up being a whole lot of trouble while you tried to heal. These meds they’re going to give you are no joke. But anyway, does that make sense?”

“I guess so,” I said. It was like he knew our trip was ending and he wanted to leave me in a good mindset. But, I didn’t care about what was best for me. I just wanted to stop coughing and keep going with my life. Jay took my silence to launch into another story.

“When I was your age, no, I know, I’m not *that* much older than you, but still. When I was twenty-two, one of my roommates died.”

“Was he sick?” I asked out of politeness.

“In a way. He overdosed on heroin. He didn’t mean to though. He was shooting up with his best friend and when trouble started happening, his friend ran. His childhood friend left him to die.”

“Jeez,” I said. In the past few days, I’d forgotten what it felt like to have sympathy for someone besides myself.

“For me, that wasn’t the worst part. I remember my roommate talking about shooting up, but from how he explained it, it was an experimental phase. He was in control as far as he was concerned. But clearly, he wasn’t. His friend took away any chance for him to wake up and turn his life around.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. You’re probably wondering what this has to do with anything. For me, a young man of twenty-two, this was the kick in the ass I needed. Any day could be it. It

didn't matter that I wasn't doing any drugs. Any decision could end up being the wrong one, you know?"

I knew what he meant.

"When I graduated from college the next year, I took off on a drive across the country. Just my Jack Russell and me. His name was Freckles. Anyway, being by myself for two months, living out of my car, that was the experience I needed. That kind of isolation forced me to get to know myself. After that trip, I felt this inner energy pushing me to keep going." He held his hand to his chest. "I felt it here."

"And then you started working for the CDC?"

Jay laughed. "Not right away. I've had lots of jobs. I like this one now, and then hopefully one day I'll find something else to try. Look, Rowen, from what time I've had to chat with you, it seems like you've been on autopilot since your mom's accident."

"How do you—"

"It's in your medical history. The hospital told us."

"Oh." Sometimes I forgot that not having a parent was information just about anyone could access.

"This hospital you're going to, you're going to have a lot of time alone. That's the nature of isolation, right? What I'm saying is, what if you find something positive about that? Of course, your treatment won't be a vacation, but you will have a lot of time. Maybe it'll give you some time to breathe."

I squinted my eyes at him and tilted my head like *really?*

"Sorry, couldn't help myself," he said.

I could see what he meant. I hadn't even thought about what I would *do* in the hospital. I'd been so focused on being forced to go there that the day-to-day feel of it hadn't occurred to me. Why not take advantage of the time?

"There are a lot of movies I've been meaning to watch," I said.

"Well, that's not exactly what I was talking about, but it's a start." Jay flashed a thumbs up to the backseat.

"I'm twenty-four," I said to no one in particular. "I don't even know what I want to do with my life."

"That's more like it," Jay said.

With the sun setting, I slipped into a deep sleep. I woke up with my head cradled in my seatbelt, and a stiff neck. Jay turned down the music and pointed to our exit sign. We'd arrived in Denver.

I followed our route on my phone, trying to imprint a bird's eye view of my new location. Jay drove west of the city, following the freeway that looped around Denver. The office buildings, high-rise apartments, cars, metro, and street lamps lit up in such a way that the city seemed to glow orange. From my window, the tallest buildings seemed to turn as we drove by them, illuminating new angles and reflections with every mile. A lump grew in my throat. I was a name on a contract, an infection, a thing that must be contained. I would be locked up. I would be alone.

As we exited the freeway loop, rain fell from the night sky. From the cracked open back windows, I listened to the van splash through puddles and slide over the street. The parking lot of Rosenthal Hospital loomed large in front of a dark, glass building

shaped like a flag blowing in the wind. I wondered what the rooms looked like from the deepest curve. Jay drove to the back of the hospital. I guessed the emergency of my situation had already passed.

“They’ll be expecting you,” Jay said. “But I can’t come in. I’ve got to get the van decontaminated.”

“Will I see you again?” In the short span of diagnosis and treatment plans, Jay had been the one small constant in my past few days. I wasn’t ready to let him go yet.

He stopped the van in front of two dark, sliding doors. Inside was a front desk lit only by one small lamp. People in colored uniforms walked past the door. My heart pounded. In that moment, I wanted nothing more than to stay in the van and sleep in shifts across the country. I thought of a re-run of a science fiction show I’d seen on TV when I was little. In the episode, a man kidnapped an FBI agent and forced him to keep driving west. As long as they moved faster than fifty miles per hour, the man’s head wouldn’t explode. You can guess how the episode ended.

Jay turned around in his seat to face me. “Do everything they say to do. And don’t forget what we talked about. Maybe some good can come from all of this.”

A round nurse in pink scrubs and a mask approached the van with a wheelchair. Rain sprinkled onto the green vinyl seat.

“Good luck,” Jay said.

The door slid open. The nurse held out her hand and helped me into the wheelchair. From inside the van, Jay held up one final thumbs up before putting the van in drive and pulling away. I stared at the halos of light around a streetlamp.

“Alright, honey, let’s get you to your room.” The purple-clad nurse stepped behind my wheelchair and pushed me through the doorway.

CHAPTER SIX

Vi drove to the address on the card. When she arrived, Anise whined and barked until Vi remembered the dog hadn't gone for a walk yet. Vi locked the car and directed Anise around the narrow strips of grass that outlined the perimeter of the property. A flagpole marked the front entrance of the wide, reflective building. They walked around the side of the property, past rows of fresh-cut hedges. The blacktop looked new, and the heat melted the tar so that it appeared wet. Anise stretched to smell flowers and tree trunks. She inspected stray pebbles knocked about by Vi's feet. They rounded the side of the building, but Vi couldn't see anything through the one-way glass windows. The sun was relentless, and even with her attempt to walk under as many trees as possible, Anise's tongue hung as far out of her mouth as it could. It was too hot to leave her outside.

Vi approached the flagpole and walked up to the double doors. She turned the handle and pulled the door open. Anise stuck her nose through first, and led the way into a spacious lobby. A glass logo the size of a library bookcase hung above the reception desk, the letters C.R.I. written in uniform, block font. Two lime green couches sat parallel to each other, creating the feel of a waiting room within a room. Slender silver lights hung from the unfinished ceiling. The desk seemed like a lone cloud on an otherwise clear day, unanchored to the spacious room.

"Welcome to Consumer Research Indiana, how can I help you?" Two swirls of dyed-black hair moved from behind the computer monitor. The secretary, a twenty-

something, wore thick makeup despite the heat, accentuating her pale skin. Dark red lipstick and black eye shadow seemed out of place against the corporate glass surfaces around her.

“Is it alright if I bring her in?” Vi pointed at Anise. “It’s really hot out there.”

The girl shrugged in her sweater. The air conditioning whirled from a nearby vent. “Probably. No one comes out to check on me anyway.” She stood and arranged something on top of the desk. “Oh my god, she’s so cute!”

Anise looked at Vi as if to say *took her long enough*.

The girl left her station and hurried towards them. “Can I pet her?” she gasped. “Her ears, they’re so soft. Hey sweet puppy...” She ran her hands over Anise’s face, smoothing her ears back and raking through the fur.

While Anise basked in the attention, Vi fished in her pocket for the business card and held it in her hand like a VIP pass. “So, is this where I can do research?”

The girl cleared her throat. “Yes, sorry. You mean sign up, see what we have available?”

Vi nodded. “Oh, and someone named Kelly referred me.”

“Great, let me mark that down and I’ll get you the list.” Her professional voice was back on, but she kept sneaking glances at Anise from over her desk and smiling. “It doesn’t look like we have much going on right now.” The girl turned the tablet so it faced Vi. She pointed with her finger to the selection.

“Well, I can’t do that one. Sixty years old and up,” Vi said.

“Right,” the girl said.

A personality study wanted people eighteen to twenty-one. Another one wanted people who suffered from severe asthma. Then, Vi read the next title: Study of Reactions to high stress and low stress visual environments. She wasn't sure what that meant, but the payment was enough to solve some of her problems. The study was open to people over the age of eighteen, who were overall in healthy condition. Vi couldn't believe her luck.

“One thousand dollars, is that right?”

The girl scrolled through the study's overview. “Yeah, this is one of our medical research ones. Those pay the most. It looks like for this one there's a minor procedure involved.”

“Procedure?”

The girl read the study's description out loud. “A blood test will determine the subject's health. Then, a small implant will be placed below the surface of the skin behind the ear. Minimal scarring is expected.”

Vi felt feverish. She hated getting her blood drawn. She didn't like to think of it as a phobia, but her whole body reacted to the experience. She wiped her hands against her shorts and tried not to imagine needles sliding into her arms.

“But we've got it marked as low-risk. How about you take this and read through all the fine print. No rush, we're open until six today. Would you like any water?”

“Actually, water would be great. Thank you.” Her voice shook, and she cleared her throat. Vi settled into one of the couches. Normally, she would do anything to avoid blood work. Even thinking about how much she disliked it made her feel sick to her stomach. Anise nosed at Vi's leg, her way of asking permission to sit on the couch. Vi

didn't want to push their luck so she commanded Anise to stay seated on the carpet. After the secretary delivered the paper cup of water, Vi scrolled through the full description. The study wanted to learn more about how brains react to experiences throughout the day, especially in changing circumstances. Then, a jargon-filled explanation of the implant. The device would record anything she saw. Something about brain waves, connections, eye tracking. Vi didn't understand all of it, but it was difficult to focus when the battle between blood work and cash played out in her mind. It turned out the study might pay much more than a thousand. If she continued long-term, the study would keep funding her for feedback and compensating her for time with this device plugged into her. It wouldn't make her rich, but it would be enough money to keep her on the road, with both herself and Anise well fed.

Vi looked over the remaining pages, mostly legal terms about the potential risks. What would this implant even feel like? She cupped her hand over her neck, trying to imagine something alien attached to her. Still, the secretary had said the study was marked low-risk. Surely the researchers had considered what an implant would feel like on someone. Vi still wasn't sure what the thing would be tracking on her. *Not like anyone has privacy anyways*, she thought. Between online presence, GPS, and toll roads, everyone seemed to be easing up on what information was private and what wasn't. If she qualified for the study, nothing about having the implant would change her plans. It was like getting paid to live her life as she normally would. Of course, living out of her car on the run was a new kind of normal.

Back at the top of the page, the payment amount loomed. One thousand dollars. A month. She checked her phone. Still no calls, but it was past one o'clock. She wanted to

get as far south of Indy as she could before the sun set. She could use some of the pawn store money to buy food, but she'd have to sleep in the car. And after that? Anise poked Vi's calf with her nose, smiling at her. Vi knew what she had to do.

In a cramped metallic smelling room, Vi squeezed the manicured hand of the lab technician while a short male nurse held a thick needle in her arm. The plastic tube wasn't that big, but as she waited for it to fill, it might as well have been an industrial-sized drum. A poster on the wall said, "Research for our future." Vi traced each letter with her eyes, rounding the curves slowly and remembering to breathe. She thought about Anise, who was probably sitting on the front desk girl's lap by now.

"You're doing great, one more vial," the technician said. The woman's grey, spiked hair highlighted her sharp eyes.

Vi's stomach felt like a pepper grinder, churning into itself. Sweat dripped down her back, soaking into the paper covering on the vinyl chair. Her face flushed, and she willed the muscles of her left arm to relax. *Let go*, she told herself. She imagined dropping a ball with her left hand, but the muscles twitched and tensed in retaliation.

"Tell me about something. Are you doing anything fun this weekend?" The woman searched Vi's face.

Vi fought through answers that came into her mind. Running? Fighting paranoia? Talking with a dog for hours? Then she laughed, a low haunted sound that only made the stranger hold her hand tighter. When the needle was finally gone, Vi condensed herself into a ball while she pressed a cotton swab to the crease of her arm. She let the paper soak up the tears that spilled down her face. The technician patted her arm and left.

Alone once more, Vi lay back in the chair and let her head fall to the side. The image of Webb's face in that motel lobby played over and over in her mind. How could she have thought a simple move of a few hours away would fix everything? She'd sold her things, and now potentially herself. That this selling entailed research didn't make her feel much better. The plastic clock above the door read two in the afternoon when another staff person knocked on the door.

"Vienna Kapur?"

"Yes?"

A gray haired man with a barrel-shaped chest walked in, leaving the door open. "Great news for you, Vienna, all your blood work looked good. You're perfectly healthy. We just need your signature to consent to the procedure."

"How long will I have it?"

The man pulled a notebook-sized tablet from the counter and dragged his finger over the screen in different directions. "This is an on-going study, so we can't say for sure. But whenever you're ready, or whenever the study ends, you can contact us and we'll set up a removal appointment. It won't take more than an hour. You live nearby?"

Vi clutched the side of the chair. "No, I don't. I'm moving, actually."

"Not a problem. What we'll do is arrange an appointment with one of our affiliates in the area, or a private doctor, if needed. We'll cover the cost, and they'll send the implant back to us. All that is in this document, so you're signing to tell us not just that you agree, but also that you understand we'll take care of anything regarding the implant. That includes when it's time to remove it." With one hand he held the tablet out to Vi.

A white screen with a black line indicated where she should sign. With her pointer finger, she traced her full name, circling back to dot the “i.”

Vi followed the man down the hallway and into an elevator, up two floors, then down another hall. He dropped her off in a changing room with lockers along the walls. A sign instructed her to remove all clothing and jewelry, and change into a gown. She’d always disliked the gowns at doctor offices. One time she’d put on a gown without any cotton strings to tie together, forcing her to wait with her whole back sticking to the paper. Now, she always remembered to check for the strings. This gown was light pink, like it used to be more saturated before the hundreds of washes it had likely seen. She folded her jean shorts and T-shirt, her earrings and bracelets nestled on top, and placed the entire pile into the bottom of a locker.

A different knock echoed through the door. Someone asked if she was ready. Vi closed the locker and opened the door. A nurse with a long braid and a thin, angular body motioned to come with her.

“My name is Kieu, I’ll be your nurse today.” She held out her hand to shake Vi’s. She spoke in soft vowels that pulled together with a hint of somewhere beyond Indianapolis. Where exactly, Vi wasn’t sure.

“Vienna. Nice to meet you. Can I ask—”

“Right around the corner. In you go.”

A bald doctor stood with gloved hands in the air and a green mask covering his mouth. Several machines loomed nearby the bed, and a silver tray held shining tools. In a

test tube the size of a water bottle, a strange tan and gold material floated in liquid. The way it curled at the edges made Vi think the implant was flexible.

“Ready when you are,” the doctor said. Vi was unsure whom he was talking to.

“What’s happening, exactly? Will I be asleep?” The feelings Vi thought she’d left behind in the blood drawing room crept back into her body. “Will this hurt?”

Kieu ushered Vi onto the bed. “Can you scoot down a bit? Perfect, and you can rest your head on the foam there. You’ll be asleep, but you’ll be fully conscious in about an hour. The doctor will make a small incision along your hairline. We might have to shave a tiny bit of it, but it won’t be much. Then we’ll get the implant in place, connect everything together, and then whenever you’re done, we’ll go back in and take it out. Okay?”

“So there’s an I.V.?” Vi’s heart pounded.

“I heard you were a bit upset with the blood test. I can give you some gas, you won’t even notice the needle then.”

“I feel like I’ll still notice,” Vi said.

“Have you had any gas before? Maybe at the dentist or something?”

Vi shook her head no.

Kieu reassured her while she set up a mask and tank. She secured a plastic cup over Vi’s nose and mouth. “Breathe through your nose, not too deep, just normally.”

Vi didn’t feel any different. Breathing wasn’t something she normally thought about. Her shoulders moved up and back down with each exhale. Her ribs contracted, her shirt shifted, dry air rushed the back of her throat.

The nurse removed the cup and put the equipment away. “So Ms. Ursa told me you brought your baby with you today?” Kieu smiled.

“Ursa?”

“The girl at the front desk?”

Vi stared at the nurse’s hair. It was black, but up close, it looked more complex. Each thick strand of hair sat so neatly. Very unlike Vi’s own hair. Kieu smiled back at her, waiting. “Oh, sorry. Yes, I brought my dog with me. It was too hot in the car.”

“Sure, sure. A little pinch.”

Vi felt a needle slide into her right arm. Strange, not having to fight it. If only all needles could feel like this one. She exhaled, and let all the fear from the morning melt out of her. After this, she’d organize the car, get a bone out for Anise to chew, and they’d head off into a new life.

“Now, count backwards from ten,” Kieu said.

The last thing Vi remembered was Kieu smiling down at her, and the doctor holding a sharp tool up to the light.

When Vi woke up, she felt heavy like a log sinking to the bottom of a river. The overhead lights glared into her eyes, and the tips of her fingers tingled. Lights, bed, sleep, cold. Sensations jumbled through her mind and she reached out to each one for answers. She turned her head from side to side, and remembered what she’d done.

Kieu moved into her field of vision. “Alright, sleepy, how are you feeling?”

“Feeling okay,” Vi said. “Did it work?”

“Work? Sure, I mean, the implant is on you now. You did great. You’re officially part of the study now!”

“Can I...” Vi reached her hand up toward her neck.

“Go right ahead, it’s on there good now. Let me help you.” The nurse took Vi’s hand and guided it up to the implant.

Vi felt the familiar smooth skin of her neck, then the edge of the implant. She jerked her hand away.

“I know, it’s weird at first. But you’ll get used to it. Now, we need to go through some post-op questions...”

Vi answered each question in a daze. The heaviness was lifting, and her mind felt clearer. Kieu asked about pain, watched her range of motion, then helped Vi sit up.

“My stomach feels weird,” Vi said.

“You going to throw up?”

“No, it just feels weird.”

“Probably the anesthesia. It’ll go away, no need to worry about it. Let’s get you back your clothes, hm?”

She helped Vi into a wheelchair, her bare feet cold against the foot rest. Back at the locker room, Vi got dressed, a little shaky, and still feeling sick. Goosebumps rose across her legs and arms, and she wished she’d worn long pants into the building. Kieu knocked, asked if everything was going okay. Vi bent to put her shoes back on. Her vision swam, and her pulse pounded against her skull. Kieu knocked again. “Almost done,” Vi said. She stood, hands on hips until her pulse quieted. *Everything’s fine*, she told herself. She still needed to get her shoes on, though. Staring straight ahead, she felt

for her shoes with her feet and stuffed them inside, rolling her heel back and forth until the shoe was on. Then, she lifted each foot up against the lockers to tie the laces. *Now, time to get out of here.* There had been enough strangeness for one day. Vi opened the door, and greeted Kieu with a smile despite her discomfort.

The nurse took her back to the waiting room where Ursa was kneeling on the floor rubbing Anise's stomach.

"She must trust you," Vi said.

"She's been a perfect lady," Ursa said. "Hardly even barked. She's been keeping an eye on the elevator though, watching for you."

"Thank you again for this. It looks like she had fun." Anise jumped at Vi's legs. She gave two short, high-pitched yips. "We'd better get going."

"One last thing," Kieu said. She took a tablet from the front desk and typed a password in. "We're supposed to show you what we'll be researching."

Vi tried to decline, but the nurse thrust the tablet in front of her anyway. Looking at the screen, Vi felt like the time she'd tried on a pair of thick glasses at a used clothing store. The prescription had been so strong it gave her a headache. What she saw was the image in her mind. She squinted her eyes, trying to see the tablet more clearly. The image was the very screen she was looking at, with the nurse's hand holding it, and the carpet underneath them. Vi looked away, out into the room. She felt dizzy. Through her peripheral vision, she saw the screen change to show a panoramic view of the room.

"A little strange, huh?" Kieu took the tablet back and closed the image. She flashed the screen at Vi to prove it was gone.

“Very,” Vi said. Anise whined. The dog hadn’t eaten dinner yet. “I’m not even sure what I was looking at.”

“Essentially, what you saw is what your brain sees as you look around at whatever is in front of you. Think of it like a little video camera sitting in your eyes. When you turn your head to look at your dog, we’ll see your dog while we still see the room you’re in. You could say we’re in the business of collecting.”

“Wait, this video...” Vi pointed at herself, which felt strange as soon as she recognized what she’d done. “This isn’t out in the world or anything, right?”

Kieu frowned, suddenly serious. “Absolutely not. Access to the stream of your video will be strictly confidential. Only people involved in the study will be able to see it. The implants also track the chemicals in your brain, basically how you react to things. Even something as simple as grocery shopping. So don’t worry about keeping us entertained.” She smiled.

Ursa chimed in. “They’re very serious about information here.”

The lines across Vi’s forehead deepened. It had all seemed so straightforward. But now, questions flew through her mind. “Will it be on all the time? When I’m showering, and...” The dizzy feeling returned.

“No, no. That was covered in the project description. The recording only takes place between 9 am and 5 pm,” Ursa said.

“Like a job?”

“Exactly,” Ursa said. Ursa reached for the tablet to show Vi, but Vi waved it away. “If you wanted, you could shower before then, or eat dinner after five, little things like that. But most people tend to forget about it after a while.”

“You’ll get used to it,” Kieu said.

“What about, I mean, I’ll be naked and things. Not all the time, just, if I was...”

“Remember, we only see what you see.” Kieu said.

“So don’t stand in front of a mirror.” Ursa shrugged.

Vi didn’t know what to say. She could feel her energy draining. *I need to go. We need to get out of here. Take the money and run.* She held Anise’s leash tight. “How will I get the money? Sorry, I don’t remember if someone told me or not.”

“It was in the paperwork from earlier, but don’t worry about it. We’ll send you payment through your email address. You can synch it up with your bank, or whatever service you use,” Ursa said.

Instant payments. Vi had heard of these before. “Thank you. Is there anything else I need to know?”

“Nope,” Kieu said. “We’ll contact you if we need anything. Have a good rest of your day.” She shook Vi’s hand and smiled at Anise before leaving the room.

“Thank you for coming into Consumer Research Indiana,” Ursa said. She held the front doors open and gave Anise a final pat.

CHAPTER SEVEN

On the sixth floor of Rosenthal Hospital, the hallway was green and sterile, with large lights hanging from the ceiling. Down the hallway I could see other doors similar to mine. I wondered if there were people in all of them. A nurse in pink scrubs pushed my wheelchair to my new home. A sign reading MDR-TB ISOLATION with a red X bigger than my hand marked the door. My hands gripped the arms of my chair as the nurse unlocked the door and wheeled me in.

We entered a small room with a hand washing station, masks, trash containers, and another door. The nurse nudged my chair to the side, and opened up the second door. She said something like, “Here we are” and pushed me forward. I pressed myself back into my chair as if I could prevent whatever was about to happen.

The room had grey linoleum floors with light green walls. One window cut into the monotonous walls, and the light of the moon stretched inside. To my left was a small bathroom. I could make out a freestanding sink and a thick plastic shower curtain. A tall wardrobe with a mini-fridge and locker, a TV-tray style bedside table, and one chair were the only furniture besides the bed. The nurse let me push myself up out of the wheelchair. She told me to put my clothes into a plastic bag and to change into the hospital gown folded in a crisp square on top of my pillow.

“Make yourself at home, and someone will be in to check on you in a bit.” Her face widened and I imagined the kind smile she must have been giving me through the pleated white mask.

With the nurse gone, I headed for the window. I looked out, straight ahead, to dark mountains. Then, some childhood memory of inhaling a cool breeze with a sharp pine scent found me. I would have to make do with only memories as the window had no way of opening. Above me, fans hummed, pulling my infected air out for scrubbing. I turned around and sat on my bed with all the weight of unknowing. I untied the knots of my mask and wiped the sweat from my face with the side of the hospital gown.

A text:

Aunt Maggie: Cleaning crew all done.

Send an update when you can.

Hope the hospital is good.

Sending you my thoughts & prayers.

I lay down facing the ceiling and let my tears stream off my cheeks and into the thin foam pillow. As miserable as I'd felt the past few weeks, I'd have given anything to be getting ready for work the next day. I wanted to be back in my apartment with my own bed, my own couch, and a big noodle soup from the Thai place on my street. Part of me knew this was a stupid wish, and that I was there to get better. But the other part of me wanted no part of it. I let all my contradicting thoughts race through my head until I fell asleep, exhausted.

A knock on my door awoke me a few hours later. "Mask on!" someone yelled. I reached for the box of masks next to my bed and tied one around my face. I hadn't even

changed out of my clothes yet. The door handle clicked and opened to a tall, older nurse walking into my room. She looked sixty or seventy to me, her grey hair pulled into a tight bun in the back of her head. Skin hung from her forearms, and her face had the expression of a turtle who's had its lettuce taken away. The door closed behind her on its own.

"You'll get dinner at six every night. Breakfast at seven, and lunch at twelve. You may keep packaged food in your room, but you'll have to order it on your patient portal." She dropped a pile of documents onto the foot of my bed. "I'm Cindy, and I'll be one of the main nurses you see while you're here."

She went on in her direct manner telling me about the rules of the hospital, how I was under no circumstances to attempt to leave my room. She assured me once the medication started kicking in I wouldn't feel like walking around that much anyway. Then she held out a plastic cup of pills.

"You need to take these right now. We'll start you on the rest tomorrow morning."

I swallowed each pill one at a time. They slid slowly down my throat, like even they didn't believe I could be that sick. When the cup was empty, Cindy asked me to open my mouth and stick my tongue out. She checked a box in her file.

I wondered what made a nurse act this way, this detachment under the guise of professionalism. Cindy was matter-of-fact, but I wanted someone who cared that I was there. Someone who knew how scared I was, and who wouldn't be afraid to make me talk. Cindy didn't seem to mind my occasional affirmative nods. Had she seen too many patients come and go? Would a nurse have the power to choose to work in the isolation

ward anyway? My stomach churned and I remembered I hadn't eaten since my road snacks several hours ago.

"You didn't get dinner?" Cindy said.

"I don't think so," I said. "Maybe though, I was asleep. Do they leave the trays?"

"Well, nothing we can do about it now. I'll make sure your room is on the delivery list for tomorrow." Cindy looked down at the watch hanging from her shirt pocket. "It was nice meeting you—"

"Rowen."

"Right, Rowen. I'll see you tomorrow during the day. And please, change into your hospital gown."

When she left, I told myself Cindy had a busy day, or a dinner date, or anything else besides looking like someone at the end of their shift waiting to clock out. Usually I was more empathetic with shift workers. After all, I knew that feeling of a customer coming into the clothing store with five minutes to close and knowing they weren't really going to buy anything. I swiveled to the edge of my bed, lowered my feet to the floor, and walked to the door. My hand reached for the metal handle and I pulled down. The handle stopped. I jiggled it back and forth. Nothing. The door was locked from the outside.

I turned around and surveyed my room. A hard plastic cup sat on the bedside table. I took it into the bathroom and tipped it against the sink. As I filled my cup with tap water, I remembered I hadn't washed my hair in two days now. Maybe tomorrow.

I hadn't made any progress on unpacking my things when I heard a knock. This one was softer, like a question rather than a demand.

"Got your mask on?"

I tied one around my face. I needed to get faster at this routine. Another nurse came into my room and closed the door quietly. I'd been staring at the small lamp so long that my eyes couldn't tell who was speaking.

"I didn't wake you up did I?"

My eyes darted above the pillow I held to my chest. The petite nurse had a heart shaped face framed wide with dark tightly curled hair. In another setting she might have been a movie star in a biopic about a harmonizing girl group reaching for the top, but here, in green flower scrubs, she was another presence ghosting through a dream I wasn't waking up from.

"I heard you got here today." She paused. "Well, I mean yesterday. Sorry, the night shift gets me a little confused on exactly what day it is, at least for you day-walkers. I'm Aliesha."

I wasn't up for acting polite. The past few hours had been realizations in waves. There was a lot to do, and yet I couldn't bring myself to move. I didn't even feel that sick.

"You probably have a lot on your mind, but I want you to know that whatever you're feeling is normal." She sat at the bottom corner of my bed. "Isolation is a strange place to be in. Maybe strange doesn't even cut it. Everyone reacts different, and how you're feeling today might change to the total opposite tomorrow. I can't promise you'll get used to it, but I'm here to help you however I can."

I folded the edge of the pillow under my chin so I could turn toward her. I thought about the image Aliesha saw. My normally soft red waves were piled into a bun on top of my head, hanging lopsided from the overstretched hair elastic. My hair was so greasy it was separating into channels on my scalp. I hadn't worn makeup in days. My eyebrows only grew halfway across, making me look like a startled doll when I didn't wear eyebrow makeup. The sockets holding my eyes felt separate from the rest of my body—they were so tired from being force fed information over the past three days. I'd been feeling skinny lately, which usually would have pleased me, but this was different. Whether it was muscle or fat, I was losing something. "How long will I be here?" I spoke so quietly it was a wonder Aliesha even heard me.

"Honey, I wish I could tell you. We won't know for a while. And I don't want to tell you any averages yet because I don't want to get your hopes up. Even if this is the worst thing that's happened in your life so far, think about what you've done before to get through situations. Sometimes we don't know how strong we can be until we're faced with something like this."

I felt tears pool in my eyelashes. No. I didn't want to cry. Aliesha probably had enough to deal with. Other patients, other files to fill out.

"Rowen, did I say that right? Rowen, I think most of us are fine being alone until we have no choice in the matter. But this is different, and you have every right to anything you want to feel."

I nodded slightly, trying to keep the tears balanced in the corner of my eyes.

Aliesha patted the blanket on top of my shins. “Alright, try to get some rest now. If you want to take a shower or anything, feel free. I’ll be back later to start you on the other medicines. Stay strong, Rowen.”

I watched grey clouds brush the moon outside my windows until I fell asleep.

One time my mom told me about Eva, a distant cousin of mine who I’d never meet. This cousin had a lot of issues: starving herself, friends that were into arson, and signing herself up for things that would hurt. Eventually, somehow, some people checked her into a hospital for suicide watch. Why my mom thought eleven-year-old me needed to learn about suicide watch, I’ll never know. If you can get through that, why couldn’t you get through living? That’s what my mom wondered, when she heard about it. Later, Eva disappeared. Joined a cult, or moved overseas, or was buried underneath a wooden cross with Jane Doe etched into it.

I wonder what Eva’s room looked like. Was it as shiny and empty as mine? Was it as fading and timeless and distant?

A year later, my mom added to the story. A boy raped Eva at a high school party. No one believed her, the boy deemed too nice to be capable. My mom said she had PTSD, which I’d been learning about in my seventh grade history class. “PTSD isn’t just for war,” my mom had said. “War doesn’t have to mean countries and guns.”

I liked thinking about her, this mysterious cousin who I didn’t know. As an only child, I craved an older sister to teach me about what was to come. I preferred imagining her life continuing, somewhere out there beyond the Mid-Atlantic where my family would live and die. When my mom passed away, and I moved in with Aunt Maggie to

finish high school because no one knew where my deadbeat dad had gone, I kept adding to the movie of Eva's life. I gave her a new name, placing her in the novels I read about teenagers running away with the circus, swapping her into epic hero adventures. I cast her as happy and full. She never had to be alone, unless she wanted to.

I hadn't thought about all of this in a long time. The last information on Eva my mom gave me was that no one had seen her since she was twenty-two, that is, my age. In my mind, she was ageless, frozen at an age that is adult but not old.

That first full day at the hospital was an adjustment to say the least. I understood the basics of what I was up against, but it wasn't until that first morning that I met the doctors who would be trying to cure me.

Dr. Mason wasn't mean necessarily, but she was strange. I only ever heard her make one joke: that her parents named her George in the hopes that she would go to medical school there. While she hadn't ended up at that university, she had become a doctor.

It was Dr. Mason who finally came to talk to me about my treatment, before breakfast. She spoke to the nurse assisting her in staccato sentences while they watched me cough up more junk into a container.

"Patient is Rowen Adler. Referral said she's resistant to our first two picks. Any allergies?"

I couldn't tell if she was asking the nurse or me. I opened my mouth to speak but the nurse flipped a few pages and answered for me.

"Looks like penicillin and pine trees."

“Rowen?” Dr. Mason made eye contact with me. “What’s the sickest you’ve been, before this?”

I told them I’d had walking pneumonia when I was about nine. It was a story my mom used to tell frequently. I came home from a school field trip, threw up, and passed out. The doctors flooded my mom with advice, but the information she clung to was that I should drink lots of fluids. I’d never been allowed so much pop before. Two glorious weeks of pop, scrambled eggs, and apple butter toast. Dr. Mason cut me off.

“And do you know what they gave you? What was prescribed?”

“I don’t know. I think it was a Z-pack?” I tried to picture the foil-backed packet sitting on my TV tray, my nine-year-old self trying not to be scared of swallowing pills. How was I supposed to remember what I’d taken? Didn’t they have my records?

“Alright. You know that what you have is a bacteria. But you need to understand that the drugs we’ll start you on are nothing like Azithromycin. A Z-pack is a sip of water compared to this stuff. You must tell one of the staff if you feel anything.”

Her voice was low, serious. I watched the nurse’s face for clues, but she looked equally stern. Dr. Mason listed possible effects of the treatment I’d be on. Aches, pains, nausea, fainting, inability to read, feeling unable to taste food, numbness, and even losing some or all of my hearing.

“You mean, becoming deaf?” Typical doctor talk, trying to slide the worst side effects in at the end.

She nodded. “It’s impossible for us to know what effects you’ll have. It’s also impossible to know when any of it might happen. You might feel some things this month, and then six months from now lose your hearing.”

I thought this doctor must be out of her mind. “There has to be something else I can do instead. Aren’t there other treatments? What if I say I don’t want these pills?”

The nurse chimed in. “Rowen, some of these won’t be pills; they’ll be injections.”

“Injections, drugs, whatever. What if I want something else? Less dangerous?” I couldn’t believe this. The CDC basically kidnapped me, forced me across the country, and now these doctors couldn’t offer me anything better than a bunch of drugs that were going to leave me worse off than I already was? What kind of a deal was this?

“Rowen, I—” The nurse started, but Dr. Mason interrupted.

“—There isn’t anything else to try.”

I insisted this wasn’t true. I asked in different ways, thinking maybe I could trick them into slipping up and admitting to some other treatment plan. I’d expected an instant fix. Monitored, sure, but quick, with no pain. Nurse Aliesha stood, hands facing up, telling me they weren’t lying. Dr. Mason grew impatient. My hands shook, and I pulled my legs up to my chest as if compacting my body could protect me.

“Antibiotics aren’t a money maker. They aren’t glamorous. We’ve got Fluoroquinolones, injectables, and some experimental stuff if those don’t work. The first and second line drugs won’t do anything for your strain,” Dr. Mason said.

The nurse tried to calm me by rubbing my back with her hand. I felt it roll over my gown’s knots. I hated being wrong. More than that, I hated admitting defeat. I’d never heard such uncertainty from doctors before. I did want to get better though. I wanted to get back to my life, and whatever great things I was supposed to accomplish. “What do I need to do?” I whispered into my hands, unable to meet their eyes anymore.

“We’ll begin today. Nurse Aliesha will get you started.” Dr. Mason reached out her hand. “It was nice to meet you, Rowen.”

I was too upset to do anything but reach out and meet her hand. Aliesha sat with me until she needed to get my breakfast tray.

A few minutes later, the door opened with Aliesha and my breakfast. “Ready for some food?”

“Yes.” I smiled. “Thank you for talking with me.”

“Not a problem.” She pulled a collapsible table from under my bed and swung it along the side. The beige plastic tray had orange juice, cinnamon bread, and scrambled eggs. My stomach churned in anticipation. “Well, today we’re starting your main medication routine. Pills and pills, and one shot.”

“Where?”

She pointed to my bonier-than-usual backside. “You’ll be getting one every day.”

My face dropped.

“On the plus side, your skin will be so tough you’ll be able to sit on any surface you want after this. Wooden benches, cement floors, diamond-crusted chairs...Now, don’t eat that yet.”

I laughed. She stepped out into the small room before mine and picked up a tray with my treatments on it. She washed her hands, then picked something up off the tray before walking back towards me.

“Left or right?” Aliesha held the needle up like an orchestra conductor.

What were the pros and cons of each side? All I could think about was mashing the cinnamon bread into my mouth and feeling the doughy ball soften against my tongue.

“Let’s start with the left. Roll onto your side now.” In one swift motion, Aliesha lifted my gown, rolled my underwear up, and plunged the needle in.

I squeezed my pillow with both fists and concentrated on the breakfast tray.

“Good. Now, I need you to take these.”

I swallowed a few pills with the thick orange juice. I normally don’t even like pulp, but I was desperate for other sensations. Aliesha stayed while I ate to go over other protocol.

“And did you bring a computer?”

I had.

“Let’s get you set up then.”

Aleshia unpacked my computer and found the plugs in my room. She even got me a mini-table that sat over my lap in the hospital bed so my laptop wouldn’t overheat. We dug through my stack of documents, an old fashioned protocol even for this hospital, and found my patient portal login information.

“Now you’re good.” She stepped back, hands on hips to admire her work.

“You’ve got the whole world on there, huh? Plenty to do now.”

It was true. I couldn’t think of the last time I’d had a day so free.

Most afternoons and evenings the past two years had been with my co-workers: Vanessa, Athena, Julie, and Phan. For a long time I didn’t even know their last names. We didn’t need to make plans because we were always working. Even when one of us

would leave for a bit, or try job-hunting again, we'd end up back at Marie Ellen's Boutique. It wasn't a bad place to work, for sure. Work starts to feel like home, eventually. Then sitting alone at home in your tiny apartment, all you can think about is how things might be going at the shop. I dreamed of registers and inventory, and the new fall collections. After finishing college, I'd started dog walking. I figured it would give me flexibility for job interviews, and every day would be different. But that flexibility went both ways, and if some of my regulars went on vacation, Wags and Tails cut my check accordingly. After a month of this, I figured a second steadier job would help. One paycheck I could count on, and one that would vary. I found the second job at Marie Ellen's, a clothing store geared toward twenty-somethings with money and women over twenty who wanted to keep their age mysterious. Every little bit of money counted, or at least that's what I'd told myself.

Dog walking sounds fun at first, spending time outside, getting to know the dogs, figuring out which tricks they've learnt, and of course realizing when they are actually training you. But no one tells you about walking three hours in the rain, or showing up to your next job sweating and wearing your hair in a bun. Again. The strangeness of changing outfits in the basement and wishing you'd packed an extra bra. I was hot and cold, standing and sitting, panicked and bored. I wasn't surprised that I got sick. In a way it felt inevitable. But not some crazy old disease like tuberculosis. Not some phenomenon I'd see in documentaries on countries I'd need eight shots to get to, not a sickness that didn't have answers or deadlines. The flu, sure, or maybe mono. Something to add to my list of a tragic twenty-something life that really wasn't that bad in comparison to, I don't know, other people who were worse off than me in every way. Someone without a bed to

sleep on, or who didn't know where their next meal was coming from. I mean, sometimes I worried about groceries, but it always worked out. Temporary isolation, the hospital people said. But temporary with no deadline left me without a countdown.

I remember the day I got my job at Marie Ellen's. It was spring, and I was walking Sissy, a greyhound and Shar-Pei mix, through the shopping district. A help wanted sign leaned against the window, underneath a mannequin wearing a long purple plaid skirt and an angular silver blazer. The thought of going another week without buying proper groceries hurt my stomach. I tied Sissy to an old lamppost. Inside, the smell of faux fall leaves mixed with the dryness of air-conditioning greeted me. At the register, a screen taped to the glass display case listed three options for me to tap with my finger. I wasn't a customer, and I wasn't "just looking." I hesitated over "other" when a girl my age walked into the area.

"No need for that, what can I help you with?"

This was one of those old-fashioned places that installed some of the customer service technology that people had come to expect, but still preferred using low-pay people to do the same work. Likely, the very job I'd be inquiring about.

"I saw the sign out front?" Among dresses and cotton shirts that cost six times what I made per hour, my jean shorts and a weatherproof shirt were out of place.

"Right. Let me get Marie."

I sensed her assessing me. From my white socks to the banana-scented sunscreen coating my arms in a shine that might as well have been sweat.

"You live around here?"

I remember being careful with my answers. I knew I couldn't give away my whole identity, since I didn't know what they were looking for yet. Or who. I needed to be as close to what they had in mind as possible, while also appearing like a person who would need the least training possible. That was something college had taught me, how to flex my very being into whoever I needed to be. Each professor or campus job served as a testing ground for variations of my personality. It wasn't that I wasn't being myself, but rather choosing which parts of myself to show first.

I told Vanessa, who would later become one of my work friend's at Marie Ellen's, that I lived close, and was on the hunt for a job working around people more. I left out the part where I was still on the clock with a dog named Sissy, and that my schedule would be limited to how quickly I could get from one job to the next. These were things I'd reveal later, and at times Vanessa would help switch with me when my two lives overlapped too much.

Vanessa climbed carpeted stairs that creaked. Everything about the store felt dated, but in a way that provoked nostalgia despite being non-specific about a time period. The store was focused exclusively on the clothing itself, and something about that intrigued me. Plus, how busy could it be?

Marie walked down the stairs, placing her feet sideways to accommodate her five-inch heels. She wore a dark blue form-fitting dress with a pointed collar. A gold belt accentuated her round hips that curved outward like an oak leaf. I checked her hands out of habit, looking for clues about her life and what answers she might want from me. Marie looked like the kind of boss who wouldn't be afraid to talk to me if I were late to a shift, but wouldn't fire me for getting food poisoning the night before either.

“Rowen?” She extended her hand toward me, no wedding ring, but a large ruby on her middle finger, and an ornate silver ring on her pinky.

After some quick background questions, Marie stepped away and placed her hands behind her back. Vanessa separated each clothing hanger on a nearby rack so that the clothes hung without touching each other. Even in retail, we give things more space than they need.

“Alright, Rowen. A woman walks in here and is building a new wardrobe. She’s gained weight, lost weight, finalized her divorce, whatever. What are three outfits you would recommend?”

Pressure rose in my throat. Flashes of my mother, watching her get ready for work, learning and mimicking every step in painting on the womanhood she wore so effortlessly. Sometimes I’d come home from school to a tablet opened on the counter with a sticky note remarking why this outfit worked, or why it didn’t. “Add a necklace and long earrings for after work!” and “With these shoes, she’d better do valet.” Even though most of my mother’s outfits were for her office job, she believed I could create the occasions for any of the outfits we’d see online.

“I’d start with a shift dress, preferably black, but navy or grey might work depending on her skin tone.” Even deep in the sweaters, I saw Vanessa nodding in agreement. “Then, I’d build her a rotating outfit, something she could break apart into a bunch of other styles. Straight leg pants—not jeans, maybe a pattern if she were younger. Then a short sleeve white top and a sweater that highlighted her eyes.” I blushed, knowing I followed none of these rules. I let the memory of my mother take over my impromptu interview. The third, what should the third thing be? I remembered something

my mother told me on one of our last shopping trips, hunting through thrift-store racks. “Third, I’d find a skirt. Something fun for herself, not necessarily for work or anything else. Then a basic blazer and sleeveless top underneath.”

Marie smiled and brought her hands forward. She dropped her voice from its previously professional volume. “Someone taught you well,” she said.

I met her eyes but I felt tears brimming along my eyelids. I hoped she hadn’t noticed.

“Vanessa?” Marie waved her back over towards us. “Can you please give Rowen the application and have her write down her availability for me? And Rowen, you may email me your official resume when you get home today. It was very nice to meet you.” She nodded her head and returned upstairs. I didn’t know anyone even *had* paper applications anymore. I started the following week, and I’d been working ever since.

I decided to shower, hoping it would calm me down. I remembered a conversation I’d heard on the bus one day in fifth grade. An older girl recounting the antics of her younger brother over the weekend. He had destroyed something in her room. “I swear, sometimes all you can do is go home and shower and shave your legs.” I hadn’t understood the concept at the time. Shave? That sounded like dangerous work to my fifth grade ears. I pulled the stiff hospital curtain across the edge of the tub. My legs looked flatter, like the muscles were turning into air. When I reached backward to examine my legs, I noticed the curves usually sitting on my hips were much smaller. My fingers prodded and stretched at the skin around my waist. I couldn’t explain it, but everything felt different. I didn’t look healthy.

I turned on the water and held my hand out to test the temperature. When the warmth un-thawed my fingers, I stepped in and shook the curtain closed. The water soaked the rest of my hair, and I lifted the curls up in clumps so I could shove shampoo along my scalp. I'd always loved how hairdressers would massage the sides of my skull, and I did my best to replicate their signature moves every time I washed my hair. As conditioner seeped into the bottom half of my curls, I finished washing my face and scrubbing my legs. My body felt heavy, and my arms tingled from all the activity. Since when was a shower a workout for me, I wondered. Still, I couldn't remember the last time I'd shaved my legs. I scraped my black razor along my shins, and in short pulls over my knee caps. A stream of short dark red hairs snaked down my legs and into the water below.

The hospital towel felt softer than I expected, though it smelled of bleach. I imagined a vat full of white towels, a long stick churning the bleach stew. I had no idea if this was actually how towels were cleaned, but the idea made me laugh. In the mirror, my cheeks had regained their pinkness, and the freckles across my face glowed like the heat had activated them. I squeezed sections of my curls with the towel. Normally I would have blown the curls dry with my diffuser but the dizziness and the ache in my arms concerned me. I unwound a hair tie from my brush and walked back to my bed. Too hot to move and too dizzy to get dressed, I lay on top of the sheets, my arms spread like I was making a snow angel. Blood pounded in my head, and my stomach felt sour.

A chill. Suddenly cold. The effort of shaving my legs undone with one shudder as my shins sprouted goosebumps and the start of stubble. I sat up and folded my hair into a loose braid. I pulled my warmest socks onto my feet.

I was laying on top of the bed when I heard something coming down the hallway. It wasn't wheels, but movement of some kind. I heard the hallway door open. I opened my clothing drawer and pulled sweatpants on under my hospital gown.

A knock at the door. "You awake? Can I come in to clean?"

I shoved my legs under the sheets and yanked the blankets up to my chin. "Okay," I said.

The door opened to a short man with arms that stuck out like toothpicks from his cleaning uniform. He wore blue rubber gloves, and a white respirator mask around his face. With his foot propping open the locking door, he dragged a cleaning cart into my room. "You're new, right?"

"A few days ago, yeah."

"I'm Mark, part of the cleaning crew. Isolation hallway is my route. Now, if you were sleeping, you can go on and keep sleeping. We're not supposed to bother you all."

"That's alright," I said. It was too late for me to pretend to be asleep anyway. I figured I might as well talk to the guy and try to find out some more information.

The man sprayed solution onto a cleaning rag. "I'm going to clean the stuff closest to you first, and then work my way around the room. Helps me keep track of what's clean and what's not. I'll start with the rails on your bed and that little table. Is that alright?"

"Yeah, that's fine." I hadn't seen a non-medical person in so long; it felt weird to be so close to someone. Not that medical people weren't people, but I figured they know

what they're in for. I didn't want to get someone sick, and I wondered if Mark even knew what I had. Maybe he wouldn't even want to clean my room.

Mark wiped each of the rails, keeping his eyes focused on his work. He swung the tray table out, and cleaned every surface of it. "I figure if it was me stuck in isolation, I'd be glad for someone to talk to."

"Yeah, I don't think it's sunk in yet. For me."

Mark sprayed more solution and ran the cloth over the outside of my bathroom door. Then, every handle of the cabinets. "So who have you met?"

"Dr. Mason," I said. "Aliesha—"

"She is the nicest lady," the man said. "Always knows the right thing to say."

"She's great."

"Who else?"

"Oh and Cindy." I paused, hoping for some insight.

"Cindy. That's right, I remember now. She's one of those slow cookers. If you're here for a while, she'll warm up to you. I think she's someone who only has a certain amount of energy, so she can't go handing out everything to everyone, you know?"

"I'll keep that in mind," I said.

I watched him clean for a while before my eyes wandered back to my computer. I propped it up on my tray table, since he'd already cleaned it.

"So we clean the rooms every day. Not always at the same time though. Sometimes it's a quick cleaning, and other times it'll be more detailed. I'm cleaning everything today since you're up, that way it won't scare you so much when you see me next."

“My room’s been cleaned already? Earlier this week?”

“Yep. Must have been asleep.”

I didn’t know what to say. I thought of my isolation room. From a bird’s eye view, it was like a little hamster cage. Instead of a nest, I had my bed, and instead of a wheel, I had my computer. With such a small space, I guessed it was probably a good thing someone would be cleaning it so often. Even if I was sleeping through it.

Mark tied new trash bags to each of my trash cans, and wiped the inside of the door. “Well, I’ve got to finish up this hallway, but it was nice talking to you.”

“My name’s Rowen.” I sat up a bit. “And thanks. It’s good to talk to someone.”

“I’ll stop by when I can,” he called out from the in-between room. A little later, I heard the wheels of the cleaning cart moving and a door opening down the hall. I wondered what disease that patient had. I wondered how long they’d been here.

Back in bed, I opened up my computer so I could focus on anyone else’s lives but my own. I checked on everyone’s pages. Their pictures, videos, any kind of updates from the real world. No one knew my situation even existed, and I didn’t want anyone to know yet. Maybe never.

Vanessa and Phan eating lunch. Pictures of their food. One picture smiling and another for silly faces. Hot Summer Sales. Fake designer sunglasses commenting on Mia’s post about her grandmother dying last month. I remembered sitting in the lounge of my first-year dorm and seeing Mia stumble toward me, drunk, unable to twist off the cap to her cranberry juice. “So I don’t have a headache tomorrow,” she’d said.

I heard a knock. The nurse I'd met last night walked in. She looked like she'd enjoyed a nice, hot shower too.

"Morning, Rowen," she said.

It was almost noon, but I repeated the phrase back to her.

"I need to draw some of your blood, then I've got your lunch for you."

I nodded.

"How are you with needles and things? Any problems?"

"I mean, I don't *like* them, but it doesn't really bother me. My left arm tends to do better though." I held out my arm to her. I could see the blue veins running under my skin.

"That's great." She set up the vials and alcohol wipes on her wheeled cart. The cotton wipe felt cold against my arm, and a sharp smell lingered. "Tiny pinch..."

She slid the needle into my vein. Dark red blood soared through the tube, spiraling toward the plastic vial. As it filled, she continued to talk with me. I learned that she normally worked the day shift, and that last night she'd been at the end of a double shift she'd been pressured to fill. She didn't exactly apologize for acting disinterested, not that I really blamed her, but beneath her explanation, I got the sense that she wouldn't always be in such a bad mood.

"Anyway, you're in good hands here. The doctors and nurses here have been through a lot of TB. I've worked here for twenty years all total." Cindy pulled the needle out and wrapped up the equipment so fast I barely noticed. "I'm sure we'll get to know each other a bit more, but right now you should rest and eat."

“Thank you,” I said. “Do you know, will there be any other tests or things later today?”

Cindy checked her tablet, presumably with my treatment details on it. “Looks like a low-key day for you. Some medicine with dinner, but that’s about it.” She disappeared out the door, and returned quickly with another plastic covered tray.

I exhaled, and leaned back into my pillows. It was hard not knowing what was coming next. At least now, I knew I’d have no more interruptions until dinner. I didn’t like the thought of being watched all the time. Isolation was enough of a trap in itself.

Cindy wheeled the cart with my vials of blood on it, and waved goodbye. I’d already moved lunch to my lap, refreshed my screen and returned to scrolling through people’s pages. The boy who might have cornered a girl in the bathroom of a fraternity house was still trying to make it with his metal band. The event poster looked better than the last one I’d seen, but his band’s logo sat two bands below the headliner. A person I didn’t know, but who shared my last name, wondered why anyone would have the nerve to tell her not to hit her kid in the grocery store parking lot, and vowed not to shop there anymore.

Then I saw matching lilac dresses wrapped around four girls that looked familiar. In the middle, in a form fitting white lace dress, my college roommate junior year, Sayuri. When I lived with her, she was an art kid, flitting between student shows, basement parties with heavy electronic music pounding over mismatched animation projected onto the walls. Her father was a small-time rock star in Japan, and his child support paid for Sayuri’s ever-changing identities and majors. The Sayuri I knew had a

round face with a streak of bleached hair that she dyed different colors depending on her mood.

The Sayuri in this picture had a skinny face with high cheekbones. Or maybe it looked that way because she was laughing. A wide smile with white teeth accented by perfect red lipstick. Her straight black hair swept back into a twist with diamonds woven in. Maybe it was a small party, I thought. Family only. I remembered holding her hand shyly while she cried over a break-up from a silent skateboarding type. One time she'd dragged a large trash bag from under her bed and tried on every piece of clothing in it, waiting for a "yes" or "no" from me. I'd never seen someone so comfortable in their nakedness, and I envied her for it.

I clicked on the image and entered a long gallery of professional photographs. The wedding was huge, some resort in Singapore. The groom looked Japanese. Their couple photos could have been on the cover of a magazine. Young Rich Kids, or maybe Marry Up. I watched a stranger's shaking camera footage of Sayuri's father give a speech that turned, predictably, into a song. Maybe she knew I couldn't afford the plane flight. Maybe we weren't close anymore. I'd talked to her last year, sometime. I'd shared about my job and she'd told me about a rave she'd been to. Whoever she was now, she probably didn't need me anymore. I clicked through the rest of the pictures, from the after party and a dessert table with impossibly high cakes. That's when I noticed the groom's cake, tiny cupcakes decorated like tuxedos. The Sayuri I knew was still in this airbrushed version of a person after all.

A knock on the door. Three knocks. Mask on. A short woman wheeled a food cart in. Dinner already. Still feeling raw from all the images I'd looked at, I kept my hand and

eyes locked on my screen until the woman pushed her cart back out of my room and the door locked securely behind her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

If I hadn't been so sick, my new routine might have felt more like a vacation. Three meals served each day, right to my bed. Cindy and Aliesha, my diligent nurses, checking on me. Each in their own way, of course. From my seven am breakfast to my six pm dinner, time was mine to fill. I spent a lot of those hours sitting up in bed, one hand over my mouse scrolling through another article. I read celebrity divorces, rumors of new shows, pop culture references, fashion advice, comic strips from people all over the world who drew not knowing if anyone would care.

When my eyes felt heavy or my wrist ached, I challenged myself to walking tests across the room. I didn't know if this was allowed or not, but I was used to being on my feet. To actually be in bed all day only made it harder to sleep. So, I paced the room slowly. I measured the tiles with my slippered feet. I slapped the rubber soles and listened for the faint echoes of my body having some impact on the world. I moved my feet in small circles with each step, toe pointing straight then outward, my heel following behind like a pageant wave. It felt like gliding, and I muffled my cough with my hand as I sought silence.

The room grew familiar, which made me want to know it more. I'd stayed in some cheap hotels when I was younger, funerals of distant relatives, the school trip to Washington DC, things like that. When I stayed in those rooms, everything seemed clean and new at first. Then, after that first night, I'd start noticing more things about the room: the dust between buttons on the remote, stains on the wallpaper, clumps of hair caught

around the desk chair legs. I'd pretend that the hotel was clean, and that hardly anyone had been in there. I stopped myself from getting to know the room. Thinking too hard about how many people might have slept on the bed would only get my mind reeling.

But at Rosenthal Hospital, I didn't have a check out time. I gave in to curiosity and allowed my exploring to grow into new angles. I knew it was clean. Mark even wiped the light switches. I let my fingers creep across the walls. I closed my eyes and felt the smoothness of new paint in a way I'd never had time for. A chill radiated from the walls, and I discovered even with my hand hovering a few seconds from contact, the coldness reached me still. As I studied the walls, my fingers found holes where something must have hung. A series of three. Perhaps pictures, of family, friends, people someone else had to leave behind.

I lay my head at the bottom of my bed, my feet resting below my pillow. Breathing was harder in this position, but it gave me new appreciation for the flatness of my bed. My face had never felt so heavy. I let my arms trail off the mattress and hang towards the floor until pinpricks swarmed my hands. I raised my arms straight above me and tested how long I could fight against their desire to fall back to the bed.

After some frustration, I figured out how to adjust the rails alongside my bed. I lowered them so I didn't have to wake up to the bars confining me any more.

In the early afternoon, I watched hospital staff walk outside during their lunch break. A small network of dirt trails wound through the back of the hospital. Young trees spouted thin branches though a whole forest stood relatively close by. I imagined conversations between the multi-colored uniforms circling, pausing, and breathing perfectly, enviably, normal. The doctors chatted with doctors, and the nurses grouped in

threes. It seemed everyone knew where to go, and how far they could walk before their break timed out.

Online, I caught up on everyone's lives. As Friday approached, I clicked "yes" to a party and "maybe" to a local concert back in Pittsburgh. I decided the doctors were trying to scare me. I'd act the perfect patient, and I'd take all my drugs like I was supposed to—why wouldn't I? My coughing would stop, my food would taste better, I'd shower more, get back into my routine of stretching my muscles every night. The meds would kick in, and they'd find that my body was responding great to everything. I'd suck up the pills and shots like a dry sponge. Then, I'd get better and I could go home like none of this had happened.

On Friday, I was in the middle of watching a comedy show that cut national news into more manageable bites when Dr. Joshi knocked on the door.

"May I come in?" His voice was muffled through the door.

"Sure," I said. I closed my computer and let my legs hang off the side of the bed while I tied a mask around my face.

I still remember my first impression of him: a tall Indian man with the kind of slow southern California accent that made me imagine him as a middle-aged surfer in his free time.

"So I hear you're feeling better," he said.

"Yeah, I think whatever I'm taking is definitely working." The end of a double shift felt worse, actually.

"Can you describe how you feel for me?"

“Well,” I said. “I feel calm. I’ve been sleeping a lot, I mean, more than I could with my jobs. I’ve been thinking maybe I’ve been pushing myself too hard.” I didn’t think that, but it seemed like something I was supposed to say. The reflective patient.

Dr. Joshi pressed his lips together and tapped a note into his tablet. He pulled a chair over. “Still eating well?”

“Yes.”

“Doing what the nurses tell you to?”

Had someone complained? I thought I’d been a low-key patient. I barely asked for anything. Dr. Joshi ignored my silence.

“Any of the medicines not agreeing with you? Sometimes Fluoroquinolones can cause bathroom issues.”

“Nope. They’re all fine. No effects.”

“Any buzzing in your ears?” He cupped his hands to each of his own ears, demonstrating, I suppose, how I should listen.

“No, thankfully.”

“And have you talked with any of your friends back home?”

The way he slid this last question out made me suspicious. I wasn’t about to fall for some second-rate reverse psychology, or whatever he was trying to pull.

“Look, I know I’m getting better. I’d like to know if I could have an updated timeline of when I’m going home.” My words sounded ruder than I’d heard them in my mind, but it was too late to take it back now. It was how I felt, and I didn’t appreciate the doctors and nurses giving me glances of doom every time I asked. I was tired of measured responses.

He motioned to my computer. “Did you see the hospital’s newsletter today? Lot’s of good information in there.”

“I haven’t set up my portal account yet.”

Dr. Joshi folded his hands across his tablet. “Rowen, I’m not sure what to tell you other than the truth. I’ve reviewed your progress so far from the collection we took this morning, and you are still pretty sick.”

Liar. I thought, though I kept my expression blank.

“I wouldn’t lie to you, Rowen.”

“Stop saying my name like that,” I said.

“This isn’t a test. The bacterium in your collection has had no significant decrease from the medicine you’ve been taking. Now normally I wouldn’t even bother telling you this, but Aliesha was concerned that—”

“What did she say?”

“She felt that you still hadn’t settled here.”

“I unpacked all my things.” I gestured around the room to my items. My opal rock, bathroom stuff, my socks, and even my makeup, not that I’d bothered to wear any yet. I walked to the window and gripped the frame.

“Your TB strain is resistant. It is tough, and these medicines are slow. We added strong multivitamins to your treatment plan to counter the toll this will all take on your body. I suspect this is why you are ‘feeling better.’”

“I don’t believe you!” I was shouting now. “I’m eating, and sleeping, and my cough isn’t that bad. I need to go back home. I can’t lose my jobs, or my place. How do you expect me to leave everything? How am I supposed to handle all of this?”

Dr. Joshi watched me rant with the patience, I later learned, of a parent who has sat through years of tantrums.

Someone knocked on the door.

“Come on in, Aliesha,” he said.

I watched in disbelief as the two of them stood next to each other like parents who don’t always agree but are coming together against a troubled child.

“Rowen, I know you are probably feeling ambushed right now, but I promise this is coming from a place of good,” Aliesha said.

“How would you know?” I tried to yell this so they’d know I meant it. But the last word caught in my mouth and set off a chain of coughing. My face burned and my ribs strained. I turned away from them. Why did they have to come in right when I was having a coughing spell?

“Get her back in the bed,” Dr. Joshi said.

Already tired out from the walking challenges I’d given myself that morning, I didn’t fight Aliesha’s hands guiding me back to the edge of the bed. She helped me through short intakes of breath until I was able to drink some water.

“You’ve got to slow down,” she said.

“Why did you tell him what I’d told you?”

Aliesha smiled and shook her head. “I didn’t tell him all that, honey, I only shared my instincts. You’re here, but I don’t think you’re completely in this world yet.”

“This TB stuff is a sneaky disease. Non-medically speaking,” Dr. Joshi said. “The patients who get out of here are the ones who focus all of their energy, or whatever you want to call it, on healing. You cannot keep pushing yourself. Everyday we have to work

to outsmart it. If it fools you into being too active, it will hit you with a setback. One medicine pumps you up while another pushes you back down.”

“What Dr. Joshi is trying to say, Rowen, is that you’ve got to learn to not trust your own body or your mind. What we’re giving you is powerful stuff, and I can tell you it hasn’t all kicked in yet.”

I drank more water, trying to soothe my throat. “So how do I know when it does kick in?”

Dr. Joshi and Aliesha looked at each other, then back at me. “I’ll put it this way,” Dr. Joshi said. “You won’t be wanting to get out of bed much anymore.”

“You seem like a smart woman, Rowen,” Aliesha said. “I know you want to do everything you can to get better.”

“There are a lot of variables here, and I promise that I will do my best to tell you how you are doing and what’s going on with your treatment. But, it’s going to take some time. Longer than anything you’ve been sick with before, I can tell you that.”

“How long?”

Dr. Joshi looked through his tablet, tapped at the keys and swiped his finger across the screen. I couldn’t tell if he was stalling or not.

“At this point, I’m going to say six months at least. That’s my conservative estimate. Now, there are other things to consider of course...”

I let them finish their usual assurances, that everything would take time and if I would only be patient I would get better. All I heard was I would be in isolation for six months at least. This room was it for me. The four walls, the window to watch the hospital staff, and the door that locked from the other side.

When they left, I filled my room with anything but silence. I resumed the comedy show I'd been watching at twice the volume. I made a list of all the movies I'd been meaning to see. I thought of books I could read. Any knowledge I could teach myself. Anything to not think about how my formerly dependable body was failing me.

My first Friday night in isolation quickly became the hardest time to fill. Normally I would have been out with other people. Even a week away from my jobs, I still tracked time by what I might have been doing. I calculated the time difference of when the shop would close. After a Friday night shift, usually closing thirty minutes past when we should have, Vanessa, Athena, Julie, Phan, and I would head down the street for cheap food from a happy hour special. We'd bash on the mean customers and rave over our biggest sales. We talked about which piece we might buy, had we had the money. I remembered I'd had my eye on a black suit jacket with a strange cutout in the back, which could reveal a presumably equally expensive and striking top underneath. A few weeks ago, I'd known I had no place to wear a suit jacket to, unless I wanted to arrive to a casual event overly dressed for the attention. Now, I definitely had no need for it.

I couldn't believe how rude Dr. Joshi had been. He came in, asked me all kinds of personal question. And Aliesha, why had I bothered telling her anything? They probably wanted to train me, keep me a submissive patient. Easy patients didn't ask questions. I was suspicious of everything they told me. It didn't help that I had no one to compare treatments with. I still hadn't heard any other patients. Only the occasional footsteps down the hall, the cart wheeling meals throughout the day, and someone from the cleaning crew. That is, if I could stay awake in time to see them.

By the second week, whatever was supposed to kick in had. I slept whether I felt tired or not. My limbs filled with rocks and my sides hurt more than ever. The coughing erupted in thick bursts, and the trash bin in my room filled with white balls of tissue paper folded around the undeniably resilient bacteria. Of course, I realized I'd pegged Dr. Joshi all wrong. Aliesha tiptoed around me until I was ready to talk again. My TB treatment was a service. Aliesha explained it to me. A public service, which made me a public problem. Some days I felt like my mind and body were in the world. Especially when the nausea paused long enough for me to finish a television show, or read an article. But other days, I couldn't have guessed what time it might be. The concepts of "goodnight" and "time to go to bed" no longer applied. As my mind slipped out of time, which according to a philosophy video I'd watched, was a human invention anyway, I set the person I used to be aside, unsure if I would ever return to her.

Hypothetically, I could get most of what I wanted through my computer. I could talk with people, entertain myself, join gaming communities, anything. Someone brought me food, and thus a job no longer mattered because essentially my body no longer required much money. I wondered if this was what resorts were like, or cruise ships. These were luxuries so far from my life that I'd never imagined my self-desiring them. I thought about people covered in deep creases, a life-long tan, shuffling onto a boat so that they could view the world from afar and forget how to care for themselves. Knowing me, I'd be incredibly bored and would resort to befriending the staff who would be unable to ignore me because their job descriptions included "customer service."

On days when I had enough strength to imagine my life after TB, I searched for things I would never have considered before. What twenty-two-year-old has a bucket list? I hadn't, but that's what I was building. Growing up, I'd imagined that as I got older, all of the things I owned would get bigger and better. Someday, instead of a cramped apartment, I'd stretch my legs across a house with rooms to designate activities to. I watched how-to videos for building a house out of shipping containers. I scoured for details on efficient use of square footage, and watched furniture fold up and out of the way when not in use. One video detailed a woman who converted a school bus into a living space. Her closet consisted of an aluminum bar with three outfits hung on it. Living in a school bus meant she had to live in mild climates. Why not? No one had to live anywhere. In a time-lapsed video, welders combined two shipping crates into a house on a beach. When the sun rose, the front of the house lifted up and out, like a garage door. House cleaning meant running a broom through the house and sweeping the dirt into the yard.

I read tips on successful skydiving but I was afraid of heights. I searched for "best jobs if money didn't matter." Maybe I would move to Central America and become a scuba diving instructor. I'd have to learn how to dive first, of course.

On days when my self-pity took over, I found myself searching for articles and videos that I knew would make me sad. I hunted for triggers, even if the relief only lasted for a few hours. Videos of parents coming home from war, engagement proposals, pet memorials, graduation speeches, teen-angst poetry, documentaries where producers pushed people to realize all the things they didn't have, co-ops transforming their city from the inside out, gratitude for food I would never, ever eat. I'd force myself to watch

the entire video, never questioning or caring what had tipped me over the edge. Between the coughing and the sniffing and blowing my nose, I'd end up feeling relieved. After a few times of doing this, I realized that setting aside time for certain emotions might not be a bad way of dealing with the whole thing. I tended to feel better after a good cry, but tears for myself seemed selfish. So, when I started feeling all the sadness of my situation overwhelm me, I searched for releases. Anything where the images captured people's sadness worked. As long as the videos could get my own tears started, I could go on for as long as I needed. Anything was better than allowing myself to sink too far into the reality of my isolation. I would need many tools and tricks for getting through another five and a half months in the same room.

At the end of the second week, I received a notification to check my patient portal. This was an online system the hospital used to keep my records, my basic information, and updates on policies that I scrolled to the bottom on the hunt for the "accept" button. I deleted hospital newsletters from the previous weeks and skimmed through the welcome letter. Rosenthal Hospital aims to blah blah, some buzzwords about caring, positive statements about their staff, and, of course, all the resources I could access from my portal. I didn't think my biographical information would be changing anytime soon.

With the first page of messages sorted through, the second page appeared. One message subject line read, "Take part in future of virtual healing through—" The rest of the line was cut off. Curious, I opened it for the rest of the message:

Subject: Take part in future of virtual healing through “Experience”

Dear Rowen Adler,

Greetings! Rosenthal Hospital has been chosen for a trial of a new wave of patient care. Studies have shown that in-residence patients’ rates of healing increase at a significant rate when the rooms themselves promote health and well-being. We would like to offer you a place in a trial that further examines this hypothesis: If patients improve in healthier rooms, they will also improve in healthier experiences.

With Experience technology, patients may receive the benefits of activities and settings that would otherwise be unavailable to them due to the nature of their conditions or the requirements of their care. Experience technology works as an alternative reality, where the sensory aspects of the hospital environment are blocked, and instead the Experience is seen.

Compensation for your time and feedback will be provided through payments of up to \$500, depending on the length of your trial, the needs of Z Medical Research, and your willingness to provide feedback. Each participant will receive a minimum of \$50 for completing the installation, introduction training, and the training exit survey.

If you are interesting in participating in the trial, please read the following consent letter, and acknowledge your desire to participate by signing and dating your name using

the digital signature box. Then, you will receive further information about the trial, start dates, equipment, and log in information shortly.

If you have any further questions, please contact Z Medical Research at zparticipantcomm@zmedical.com. Be sure to reference your trial in the subject line.

Sincerely,

Z Medical Research and Rosenthal Hospital Trials Department

I couldn't decide what was more exciting—the opportunity to earn money, or the idea of doing something new. I read through the consent form as best I could. The letter read like a circle, rolling back on itself. There was a mention of special goggles that would block any light from the real world. It almost sounded like a type of virtual reality, except I didn't get the sense that I would be in control of what I saw or did in these experiences. Still, it wasn't a movie or an article, and it wasn't on my computer screen. If it was terrible, or didn't work, I'd at least walk away with a minimum of fifty dollars just for trying.

I signed my name and checked the date on my computer. If they picked me, five hundred dollars. What would I get with that? Other things to wear? Food from the snack cart when I couldn't bring myself to eat another plate of scrambled eggs? Or should I save it for my student loans? For a new security deposit on an apartment when I got out? Maybe nothing would be waiting for me when I got out. Maybe the whole world would continue grinding its teeth without me. People all over the world would take deep breaths

in and out, and not even think about how this didn't cause them pain. When I got out, if I got out, no jobs would be waiting for me. How would I explain away the resume gap? Five hundred dollars was little of an answer to any of these questions. I put my computer aside, and drifted into a panicked, heart-pounding sleep.

Dr. Joshi was right. As the days passed, I got out of bed only when I had to. I showered once a week at most. This wasn't who I normally was. Rowen the recent-graduate took pride in her appearance. She felt off-balance without makeup on, and certainly didn't go for more than a single day without washing her hair. A part of me still cared about all of that, but everything felt exhausting. Sometimes I wished I could be in a coma until I got better. It could be like a fairy tale, and I'd wake up at my best weight and all my curls in the right direction. The more I thought about fast-forwarding through time to a post-TB me, the more I wondered what other versions of myself I could be.

I used to make online user names that had no connection to me, and wrote outrageous things. On a movie review site, I wandered about until I found a page for a little known B-movie style documentary about a terrorist attack some years ago. The title showed a startling lack of imagination: "What They Don't Want You to Know."

The commenters were torn between whether the film was meant to be funny on purpose:

That voiceover? The too-deep voice and ending every sentence like it was a question with 'dot-dot-dot' after it was hilarious. I don't see how you could see it any other way. The grainy graphics were the icing on the cake to the ridiculous rhetoric his

“experts” spouted. Would watch again for the pure enjoyment of the detailed backgrounds of the experts’ offices. Props for the X-files poster.

Other people were more like:

You are all sheep. Literal sheep. This movie was a serious wake-up call for me. The fact that they had to dig so deep to find all their sources just goes to show how far *they* will go to hide the truth from us. Their main source, that independent researcher guy, he got his Master’s degree in Leadership from one of the top online universities.

Still, others were even more to the point:

I don’t want to write what I really think on here because no doubt the government is monitoring this page. But, check out my blog below for my thoughts.

w h o i s w a t c h i n g y o u .com (delete the spaces thx)

The comments were such a fantastic mash-up of people and agendas that I read through them for an hour. Some users popped up again and again, like they were returning to the page every few days to check up on their arguments. No one used real names, and only a few told personal stories that revealed something about themselves. I wondered who these people were. Were they all teenage boys, unknowingly roping me into their elaborate, but completely ironic, conversation? Or were these adults in basements and apartments and penthouse suites all across the world hosting a vicious, sincere debate? For some reason I imagined them as mostly men. Kind of like when you’re driving and someone cuts you off. “What is he doing?” It’s like a default setting.

Normally, reading and wondering about what I'd read would have been enough. But I was bored. It was another day in a long string of days of not feeling well and taking pills and getting shots in my ass. My clock said it was only mid-morning. I opened a new page and created a username for the website. I went with "notmyrealname." That would be meta enough to fit in with this crowd. Back on the documentary's page, I started with replying to some people's comments with phrases I would never use. Like "right on, brother" and religious passages I'd copied from my search for "popular quotes about hell." I argued metaphors and conspiracy theories until someone made an image with my user name and a flying saucer.

Next, I infiltrated an online community of boutique buyers and claimed I owned a shop in Junction City, Kansas. I found the city on a map. Sometimes I was helpful, like when another shop owner asked if yard sales were worth it. I told them how I felt, that the market had been flooded with people in the middle. Apps on phones sending a box of outfits once a month, or a factory in another country moving a shipping crate full of mannequin's clothes to multiple countries throughout the summers. Every option was so easy, if anyone had valuable clothing they didn't want, there were more than enough hands to reach out and say, "Me! I'll take it." But in my more stormy moods, I made wild predictions about teen clothing trends. The more nonsensical the better. I wrote:

It's not about picking a body part to show off anymore. Now, it's all the parts. The look is ironic yet sincere. Multiple patterns, patchwork, fake fur and real fur combined, but all of it on variations of body suits. No skin shows at all. The idea is this: even without showing anything real of themselves, you still won't be able to look away.

They asked for tips on finding this elusive mix of fake and real fur. I posted a link to a site for pet taxidermy and deleted my account.

Being online should have meant infinite possibilities, but I was beginning to run out of ideas for things to do. Even sitting through a movie could be a difficult task for me. I'd fall asleep and wake up to a scene that gave away the ending.

One evening, I'd gotten sucked into reading restaurant reviews in France and was deciding whether I should add obnoxious tourist-isms to the comments when Aliesha knocked at my door. She walked into my room with a brown cardboard box. "Were you expecting anything?"

"I don't think so," I said.

"It isn't your birthday is it?" Aliesha smiled.

"No, don't worry. I know you wouldn't miss it."

She put her hand over her chest, as if she was in a soap opera. "I wouldn't dare!"

I pushed myself up, but the muscles in my arms resisted. They shook like I'd been lifting weights all morning.

"Oh, I'll open it, don't worry." Aliesha's smile disappeared. She picked at the tape with her fingernails until it peeled up. Then, she pulled the tape off the box in one smooth motion. She set the bubble wrap on my dresser. "Save that for later." She winked and then pulled out a large headset with a dark, reflective screen. On the sides were round headphones that would easily encompass my ears. I remembered the email, and the research I'd signed up for.

"Those are for this experiment I signed up for."

"Experiment?"

“You don’t know about it?”

Aliesha shook her head, no.

I explained how I’d gotten this message on my patient portal, and I was bored out of my mind, and I didn’t really understand exactly what it would be.

“So, you’ll get to pretend you’re not in this room for a bit, right?”

I told her I thought that was the idea.

“I think that sounds great! Anything that helps you feel better. Will you get to talk to people on that thing? Or is it more like you’re in a movie?” She picked up the headset and held it in front of her face like a magnifying glass.

“I don’t know. Let me see.” I opened my computer and balanced it on my stomach.

“Honey, that’s terrible on your neck. Let me help.”

Aliesha adjusted the bed so I sat more upright. My hips popped as I shifted back into my pillow. She stood next to me so we could both see the screen. A notification sounded, and my patient portal had a new, unread message in it.

“Please confirm delivery of Experience headset.” I read the message out loud. “Below is a log-in for the Experience website. Please complete the tutorial within one week.”

“Well, I’d better leave you to it then,” Aliesha said. “Just don’t tire yourself out too much.”

I promised her I wouldn’t, smiling up at her with my wrists resting against the keyboard.

As soon as Aliesha left, I logged into the Experience website. It looked professional, more so than I was expecting. A small pop up screen asked if I agreed to all the terms and conditions. I accepted. The site re-loaded, and told me to put on the Experience headset.

They were heavier than they looked. A nylon strap wrapped around the thick viewer shell. It was too flexible and soft to be plastic, and once the headset was on my face, I could feel my body heat warming the material. The screen flashed into the viewer, a bright pinhole of light that flooded over my entire vision.

“Welcome to Experience,” a smooth female robotic voice said. “This tutorial will take ten minutes of your real-time. If you wish to exit and complete this tutorial later, please remove your Experience headset now.”

The block text logo of “Experience” hovered in front of my eyes. It wasn’t like watching a movie at all. It was as if I were in a completely white room, full of light and the text had flown over to me. None of it made much sense, but still, I felt calm.

“Thank you. This is a prototype version of Experience. Possible side effects may include, but are not limited to, dizziness, nausea, dry eyes, and hallucinations. Please state yes if you understand and agree to the risks.”

“Yes,” I said.

“I’m sorry, can you repeat that?”

“Yes.” I pushed the word from my mouth in a way that resembled no accent that I knew of.

“Thank you. One moment please.”

A robotic symphony erupted in my ears. It wasn't loud in the sense of volume, but more like I was diving into deep water with no need to come up for air. Neon colors danced across the screen, creating patterns out of dots, lines, and hints of shapes. I remembered being little and pressing my eyelids shut with my fingers. I'd watch the strange shapes and halos of light float across my vision. It had always fascinated me to see something without opening my eyes. The noise from Experience shifted to a different key, something sharp. Then, quiet. I blinked and my eyes adjusted to the image of a neighborhood in the full blaze of fall.

"Welcome to the Experience tutorial," the same female voice said. "You are currently Experiencing Boise, Idaho in October."

I'd never been to Idaho. I guessed I'd have to take her word for it.

"In each Experience, our goal is to give you the perfect Moment, without any effort from you. Feel free to get comfortable. Sit in your favorite chair, or, you may even lie down in bed. Wherever you are now will soon be far away. Once you put on the Experience headset, we'll take you on a journey of perfect Moments. From short-term ones like the current screen, standing in a neighborhood, to long-term Moments like walking down a boardwalk, or a week-long scuba diving trip. The Moments are endless, the choices are yours, and the effort is on us."

While she spoke, leaves tumbled across the sidewalk, and the low branches of trees shifted. I could almost feel the breeze. At least, I could imagine feeling it. It was like being inside of a screensaver.

"Now, we will begin a short Moment of hiking through the foothills. If you look down the street, you can see a sand covered path. I'll meet you there." In my mind, I

hesitated, but the image moved along as if I were walking down the street. A brown squirrel with an acorn darted between the leaves and up into a tree. The screen shifted to follow the squirrel, who chattered back from the safety of a high branch. I kept walking, or moving. A green house with a red pattern across the windows shifted slightly, like the image had paused. Seconds later, the house jumped back into the correct perspective. A glitch.

I could almost smell the leaves. A breeze pushed through the tree tops. All the falls I'd seen in Pennsylvania filled my mind. As my eyes watched the sandy path get closer, I felt more and more like I was there. A pile of golden and carrot-colored leaves clustered near the edge of the trail. I thought about the sound of leaves crunching under my feet, and I smiled.

“Which of the following sensations did you experience? Please focus your visual attention over a check box to select it.”

Five check boxes appeared in front of me. Sound? Yes. Well, some. It wasn't like the whole street had come alive. Touch? Yes. Taste? I remembered learning in third grade that our sense of smell effected how we tasted. But I guessed the research people didn't want me thinking that hard about this. I moved onto the next box, Sight. Yes. Smell, yes again.

“As you walked down this street, you may have experienced Blurring. This is our term for when your brain fills in sensory experiences that we are yet unable to provide through Experience. From our perspective, we only provided realistic visuals. However, from your perspective, you may, at times, have felt like this. The more time you spend in

Experience, the more your mind will fill in the blanks. We'll practice this along our tutorial hike Experience."

The screen jumped, and the visuals once again were on the move. I felt like I was walking. The voice guided me toward the top of a hill, pointing out things I would normally feel as I hiked. A crisp breeze hit my face as the gaze turned to admire the Japanese maple trees lining someone's backyard. The sand and small rocks rumbled under my shoes. The sun shone against the faces of tiny yellow flowers with prickled stalks. The trail angled upwards and my calves stretched themselves out. My senses blurred. The bed and the blanket melted away and I gave into the illusion. A hawk flew high over my head. It looked like it was holding a squirrel or small rabbit in its beak, but it was gone before I could decide. A large sunflower slid across my shoulder startling me. I turned my head to examine it and locked eyes on its half moon of missing petals. Fall was here, but the flowers were holding on. At the hill's peak, the clouds paused.

"When each thirty minute Moment is complete, you will hear this noise," the voice said. An electronic chime chirped in my ear. "If you remove the headset before this chime, you will feel intense disorientation, which may leave you unable to properly respond to the surroundings in your reality. After hearing the chime, tap the left side of your headset to begin the shut-off sequence. The sequence will ease you out of where you've been, and back into your world."

What happened if I needed to pee? Or a nurse walked into my room? These thoughts floated through my head while I examined the clouds frozen in time.

"This concludes our tutorial. Please allow yourself at least two hours in reality to check for any side effects. We hope you enjoyed your first time using Experience, and

feel free to begin exploring our website for more information and to select what Moment you want next. Please wait until the exit sequence has completed before removing your headset. Thank you.”

The image in front of me faded out of focus slowly. The same electronic symphony played a series of notes that ended in a low C note. Chorus class in middle school had stuck with me, it seemed. A room the color of blue hyacinth flowers appeared. There was a door, with an exit sign above it. I watched a hand reach out and open the door.

“You may now remove your headset,” the robotic voice said.

I pulled the headset off. Back in my room, the lights seemed brighter, the air staler. My ears felt warm from being inside the headphones. Nothing like the fresh air I’d been breathing on the hill in Idaho. But not really. I looked at the goggles again. So much of a world, and it was all in my head. Or my eyes, technically. How had they done it? I rubbed my thumbs down my calves, stretching the muscles. They ached in a refreshing way, like I’d really been on a hike. Strange.

On the website, the completion of the tutorial unlocked more Moment options: Skiing in Salt Lake City, collecting sea shells along a beach in Corpus Christi, and even an elevator ride up Tokyo Tower. A frequently asked questions section repeated the information I’d heard in the tutorial. I wondered again about the side effects. If I was feeling anything, it would be tough to distinguish them from all the effects of my meds. Plus TB. I couldn’t forget about that. As I scrolled through the Moments, wondering which one to try next, I slid further and further down into my bed. I fell asleep with my hand warming against the keys.

When I woke up, the last bit of orange sun was disappearing. The glow made the trees look like embers in a campfire. I thought about the weekend outdoors camp I'd gone to one summer when I was little. They taught us basic skills, like making a lean-to and stuffing it with leaves to keep warm, and how to identify animal tracks on the ground. The kids and our leaders, who I realized now were probably local teenagers and not the wilderness experts I'd believed them to be, would go on late-night walks. The leader in front would play recordings of owl calls, the volume turned up as loud as it could go. The rest of us would follow single-file, trying not to make any sounds while we strained our ears for a response. The leader would pause every once and a while to turn off the recording while we stood silent and cold, waiting. I'd imagine my ears opening up like a cave and swallowing up all of the sounds. In that moment, I wanted to hear an owl call back more than anything. It wasn't like I hadn't heard owls before. There were plenty around where I lived, and to hear one calling from some distant telephone pole wouldn't be out of the ordinary. But at that camp, there was something strange about knowing us kids could make it happen. Somehow we could make a flying nocturnal creature stop what it was doing to have a chat. I still remember hearing the first call back. A barn owl somewhere in the dark answering loud above the crickets and the leaves and the chill. I can't say for sure, but it felt like all of us were holding our breaths. I froze my eyes to the ground, afraid to move. Afraid to break the magic.

Dinner arrived, a hospital version of beef stroganoff. The canned mushrooms looked especially reflective. I ate half, then swallowed the pills on my tray one at a time. Since I'd slept until noon, I decided I might as well stay up until Mark cleaned the

hallway outside my door. I stumbled across a murder-mystery “who-done-it” set in England and allowed the eight-part series to wash down my dinner and absorb my night.

Shortly after, I heard Mark’s cleaning cart wobble down the hallway. I paused the final episode— the big reveal could wait. I was sure the murderer couldn’t be the priest anyway, and I had no other guesses as to how the story would end. I heard the hallway door open, then the familiar knock at my door.

“Hey, Miss Rowen. How are you feeling?” Mark stepped through the doorway and pulled the cart in after him.

“*Bleh*,” I said. “I’ve got cabin fever.”

He surveyed the room. “Not exactly a cabin.”

I wondered if there was a cabin Moment. Maybe somewhere in the mountains. Appalachian, with dark trees and pockets of vines. Or maybe there’d be snow. I could sit in an overstuffed armchair made of jean fabric, like my mom used to have. A fire stocked with logs and pine needles. I closed my eyes.

“Anything new?”

I snapped back to my room. Mark had started his cleaning circuit, wiping down the side tables. I figured Mark might be able to answer the question that had been building in my mind. The one I doubted Aliesha would answer for me. “Do people ever leave here?”

“You feeling down?”

“No,” I said. I watched the creases around his eyes crinkle as he looked between me and the cleaning cloth. “Well, I mean yes, but that’s not why I’m asking. Have you seen people check out of this hallway. Maybe suitcases or an empty room—”

“Empty room’s not always a good thing.”

My error hung in the air. Mark returned to the cart to spray the cloth more. My stomach dropped, and I knew that he had probably made friends with patients who had died. Of course, in my mind I imagined people much older than me. A withered grandmother type, who savored a final friendship with the kind cleaning man. “Sorry. I meant do people get better? In this hallway?”

“You know, I’ve seen some people leave. Now I don’t know if they were all better. Like I said before, I don’t know what anyone’s suffering from and I don’t make it my business to find out. But, yeah, I saw a guy leave a few months ago. Probably before you got here.”

Electricity ran over my skin. Someone had left. “Did he walk out? On his own?”

“Yes, as best I can remember.”

I repeated Mark’s words in my mind. Don’t jump to conclusions, I reminded myself. “This man, was he very thin? What did he look like?”

Mark reached for the mop handle sticking out of a bucket on the cart. “Rowen, I only saw him for a minute. I wasn’t looking for whatever you’re hoping he had. I didn’t mean to get you too excited about all this, I just didn’t want you to think...”

“What?”

He paused in the far corner of my room. In a quiet voice, he answered my question. “I didn’t want you to think everyone died down here. You do what you have to do to get through this, Rowen. Now, try to rest.”

Mark sped through the rest of his cleaning. I got the message, and resumed my mystery show with the volume up just enough for Mark to know I was watching it. He

waved goodbye at the door, and I tried to smile in a way that let him know I hadn't meant to worry him.

The next day, I woke up with an intense desire to try the headset again. On the website, I set up a queue of Moments I wanted to try out. I was two hours deep into my queue when a message popped into my vision and paused the world I was in.

Do you want to continue Experiencing?

The hell was this? Yes, I wanted to keep going. What business was it of theirs how long I'd been in here? I'd gone waterskiing on a lake, found my way out of a corn maze, and was rocking in a swing on a front porch in New Orleans when this message had paused a car driving past me. The blur in my vision strained my eyes. I squeezed them shut and spoke out loud: "Yes."

The image un-paused, the car zoomed by, and I went back to rocking in the swing. The hedges bobbed up and down in my vision. It was like a massage for my eyes. A well-deserved rest after the activity of the other Moments.

While the wide-brimmed fan spun slow overhead, I thought about the rest of my day. Not the real part, which was the same variation of shots, pills, and mandatory meals. I thought about the world inside the goggles. I thought about my account which I'd figured out earlier that day. On the website, I could set up Moments in a row, like a music playlist. I obsessed over variation, and matched moods to scenes. The descriptions on the site didn't always reveal what I'd end up doing. With the waterskiing one, I hadn't expected a rambunctious family outing on the boat. I certainly didn't expect the wooden jump built into the lake. My chest hurt with virtual fear as the image brought the jump

closer and closer. It was taller than my Aunt's house. The wood was slick with water and what can only be described as lake slime. The image moved down to purple shining skis hovering in the air. As the lake ran up to catch me, I howled with delight. I'd never been waterskiing before. Technically I still hadn't. I wondered if I'd be better at it now that I'd gotten to try it out. The family boat pulled me in snake-like loops back toward the launch. The image ended with stepping up a ladder covered in striped mussels onto the sun-bleached dock.

At the corn maze, one of my own memories was triggered. I caught glimpses of holding my mother's hand and walking through a similar maze. In the Moment, I brushed my hand along the corn stalks and listened to them rattle together. Glints of sunlight caught my eyes between the paper leaves. The jeans and boots I wore were baggier than what I usually go for, but it still felt like me walking around. Between the husks on the ground, the hay, the corn, and the sky, it was a world of golden-yellow. I felt more relaxed than I had in days. I reached the end of the maze where apple cider and cinnamon-powdered donuts waited on a card table. The image cut off the other people's heads, but their body language seemed friendly. I took my snacks and moved to an open bale of hay. The view of the end of the maze froze, turned to black. The chimes rang in my ear. I exhaled, and found myself in a swing looking out onto hot pavement, a slow street, and vines creeping onto every surface.

I'd only set up three Moments in a row. An hour and a half seemed long enough for one go. Besides, I wanted to make sure I liked all of them. It seemed strange that there wasn't a safe way to exit a Moment before it was done. But it wasn't like this was some

professional technology thing. I'd take what I could get. Anything really, to escape my reality and my room for a while.

On the porch, I watched a glass of lemonade work its way to empty. The ice melted and tumbled on top of itself. A school bus stopped at the corner. Then, my time was up. The image faded, the chime rang, and I tapped the side of my headset. In the blue room, the exit door opened, and I was back in my isolation room once more.

I felt the kind of tired that I used to feel after a double-shift back in Pittsburgh. The muscles in my legs throbbed, and I felt lightheaded. I realized I hadn't drank any water in hours. The lemonade and apple cider in the Moments had tricked my mind. In the real world though, instinct kicked in and I gulped water from my cup. Back in Pittsburgh, sometimes I'd skip taking the bus home after closing the boutique so I could walk alone and clear my head. I'd run through all my worries from the day. I'd analyze the bad customers, or replay funny moments with my friends. With my walk, I'd push myself to walk in longer strides, or curl my toes in a way that my calves would stretch out after hours of standing. By the time I got home, my adrenaline would be worn thin. There would be nothing left to think about. I could run on auto-pilot through my routines of getting ready for the next day, and getting ready for bed.

This is how the hours of Moments made me feel. It was like I'd accomplished multiple things, with great success. Though I'd Experienced waterskiing over a jump, a part of me was still conscious that I wasn't in control of the waterskies. I knew the jump would go fine, and the image I was seeing myself in was not really my own. The website didn't say too much about this. It only assured me that any lingering hesitations from my mind would go away with time, like muscle memory.

I jolted awake from a knock on the door. As I pulled a mask on, I realized I didn't remember deciding to sleep. I'd been walking a beach in Experience. Then this. The headset lay on my bed. I moved it to the table, hoping it wouldn't draw any attention. Aliesha's hair was different today, sleek and straight. Normally it sat right above her shoulders, but now it fell to her collarbone.

"Hey Rowen, how'd you sleep?"

"Pretty well I think. I'll probably sleep some more later."

"Sorry I know it's kind of early, but Dr. Joshi wanted me to give you your updated care plan." The brightness of her eyes faded for a moment before she forced herself to smile calmly again. It happened quick, but I'd caught it.

"What's wrong?"

"Well, we need to add more medicine to your routine. You've got some tough cells in there." She nodded at me. "Dr. Joshi is concerned we're not making more progress with the TB levels. So, nothing you haven't heard before. We've got to give your body as much as it can take to stay ahead of the bad stuff."

"I don't feel any worse," I said. But even as I spoke, I started noticing sensations I hadn't quite processed since waking up. An ache in my side, like a runner's cramp. My feet were sore. When had I even stood up last? I wiped sweat from my forehead.

"Nothing major anyway."

"I know, honey. It's going to be hard for you to tell what feelings are coming from where. I don't think you need to know the details, but it's going to get much harder for you to keep track of time."

I shoved my hands under the blanket. My fingers found each other and I squeezed.

“We’re all going to come check on you more often. You might not notice us each time. I know you’ve got that funky headset thing to play with. But try to remember to drink enough liquids. If you get dehydrated again, we’ll have to start you on an I.V. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said. How had they known I was dehydrated? I wondered how many people had come into my room without me knowing. Checking on me and my vitals.

“Hey, Aliesha?”

“Yes?”

“Why’d you change your hair?” I thought of all the styles I’d tried on my own hair. All of that seemed like a different person now. It was too hard to look at myself as parts that needed caring for. All I could worry about was staying sane in the room. And my lungs, of course.

Aliesha laughed. “Oh it’ll be back to its usual bouncing self soon. One of my good friends came to visit and she got fixated on trying something with my hair. So I let her straight-iron it. Every time I catch my reflection it takes me a second to realize it’s me.” She ran her hand over her head. “It really makes my face look different, huh?”

I smiled. “Eh, flat irons. Too much work.” I hoped she could see my curls through my mess of a bun.

“I’m right there with you,” she said. “Alright, Rowen, you go back to sleep now. And promise me when you wake up you drink a whole cup of water.”

I scrunched down into the blankets. “I will. Thank you.”

There was something about how Aliesha looked at me before the door closed off her gaze. I stared at the ceiling, searching my mind for the connection. The Principal. It was the same look he'd given me when he told me about my mom.

It was almost summer when the principal called me into his office through the loudspeaker. I was in eighth grade, and everyone in the class whispered while my teacher did her best to ignore us. Walking down the hallway I racked my brain for what I might have done. Texting in class? Grades? I couldn't think of anything remotely bad enough to warrant a visit to the office. I remember sitting down. He looked at me with such serious, heavy eyes that I knew something terrible had happened. Then, his words became so distant they felt like they were traveling to me underwater. Dead. Sorry. Quickly. Dead. Dead. Principal Miller waited for me to cry. I couldn't think. Him shaking my arm and telling me to breathe. My heart throbbing above my eyes. A lady from my mom's work who'd babysat me when I was younger opened the door. I could tell she'd cried the whole way over. I waited in the car while she packed me a bag from our apartment, and I spent the next day on her couch watching animated movies over and over, one after another. My body lost itself in the inevitability of a plot one already knows.

The adults in my life decided me living with my Aunt Maggie would be best. By the time ninth grade started I'd grown two inches and learned about a whole list of things that would no longer happen. Aunt Maggie couldn't check my homework (she didn't want to), and she didn't argue over what courses I wanted to sign up for (didn't matter to her). Meals became something done alone, sustenance over conversation. If there was one thing that made me feel my absolute smallest, it was being a burden to someone else.

I knew I couldn't bind myself to another person so completely ever again. Not that I blamed myself, I mean, she was my mom. I was supposed to trust her and count on her, and feel bad when I didn't take every opportunity she'd set up for me. But to do all of that again sounded tiring. In a way it angered me that I was supposed to have the capacity to feel that way. It was more about guilt, though. That feeling of owing someone, or needing them to do things for you. Through high school I lived like a renter in my temporary home. Aunt Maggie would never refer to it as temporary, but I knew what the deal was. Whether I got good grades, or went to track practice, that was all up to me. Friends' parents helped drive me to stuff, because they knew my situation.

Sometimes I wonder how I might have turned out if my mom hadn't died. Most of the extracurricular stuff I signed up for in high school was so I didn't have to be at home that much. I didn't like feeling in the way. I was a three sport athlete, set up for all the dances, organized a teen coffee house. Jobs in the summer, and babysitting on the weekends if I didn't have plans out with my friends. Even if I was just sitting at a friend's house eating cookie dough and watching the same movies we'd watched the weekend before, I was happier there than alone in the guest room of my Aunt's.

After high school I worked for a year and got myself emancipated. With all the financial aid I qualified for, I headed off to a small four-year school in Pennsylvania thinking it would solve all of my problems. Even the ones I didn't realize existed yet. I ended up with a B.A. in General Business with a photography minor, which meant I floundered around and somehow took enough math while still maintaining some of my artistic side. Everyone seemed optimistic. We were all going to pursue our dreams, and no one would end up in a cubicle.

Some people say that with a group of girls, everyone ends up playing a different role. I was the follower, hoping for something fun to do each weekend, but lacking the organization skills to pull all the friends together. Luckily, someone else usually had a plan, and I'd be off with ten other people to ladies night at the arcade bar, or cheap seats to a student show. In college it felt like there was always something for me to tag along to. I don't remember many weekends spent alone in my dorm room, unless it was finals week.

But we all graduated. People moved back home, got pregnant, took care of their addict brother, married an Air Force officer. I moved to Pittsburgh because it was the closest big city, and I figured that would mean more jobs. It turned out a mediocre student with a business degree wasn't in high demand. No desk in a skyscraper for me. No company lunches, or coffee shop breaks in the mornings. I wouldn't say I was entitled, but more of naive in thinking that my hard work was over.

It wouldn't be fair to say that I was all on my own in the world. Aunt Maggie offered me my room back for a month, but it felt like too much of a backslide to be an option. I was three months out of school, living in a rented room in a house with three other people and two cats. The house sat at the top of a steep, grass-covered hill. Pittsburgh operated in layers, and this house was sandwiched between two of them. At the front of the house, a wide road wound downwards along railroad tracks. The train itself ran through a tunnel deep under the house. Every evening I'd hear the whistle and the whole house would shake and echo. The back of the house bumped into the alley of a busy, student-oriented street complete with two coffee houses, an over-priced art store, and cheap Chinese food.

By the end of that first summer as a non-student, I moved to my own one bedroom apartment. I was done climbing three steps of stairs to get up my front yard, and another two flights to my room. The new apartment opened to a ground-level patio, and quiet, mysterious neighbors, it was a small piece of independence heaven for a while. That was until I started coughing, and the hospital sent Jay with his CDC van and Horizon chili came to take me away.

CHAPTER NINE

In the parking lot of Consumer Research Indiana, Vi pulled her hair up into a ponytail. She couldn't sense the implant in her, but her fingers brushed the smooth edges of it and she shivered. It felt bigger than it really was. The events of the day were overwhelming, and her body felt like it was amping up to the top of the highest roller coaster, waiting for the drop off. Anise sat panting in the passenger seat. She seemed content with the quiet of the car. Vi turned the air conditioning up and Anise stuck her nose into the vents. The center console screen read five o'clock, and the map showed the freeway packed with traffic. Vi's fingers found their way to the implant again, tracing the strange material. It was off now, whatever that meant. It reminded her of when she first got her ears pierced. The small gold balls seemed to hang in her earlobes. She'd run her fingertips over the smooth surface, so foreign to her skin. She'd stared at the new jewelry whenever she caught her reflection in a mirror. It was strange, all the things one can do to a body. With each memory, Vi felt for the boundary between the implant and her skin. She thought about the dizzying experience of the tablet, her vision of her own vision in the lobby. Ursa smiling at her. How they would record what she saw. Vi needed movement, distance, and a place that felt safe enough to sleep. She felt wary of making new decisions. The fear from the morning latched into her. The fear burned her chest and made her hands shake as she typed their destination into the screen.

"Well, Anise, I guess we're off to Tennessee."

Vi turned out of the parking lot and out onto a busy street. Green signs for I-65 South loomed ahead. The first traffic light turned red, leaving her stuck before the ramp to the freeway. She cursed and scanned the road for Webb's car. No sign of it. There was no reason for looking, really. Between the pawn store and the research building, Vi was far from where she'd last seen him. The bass from a nearby pickup truck buzzed the glass in her windows. Vi let her arm rest along her door so she could feel the vibrations. Sensations to focus on were better than where her mind might wander to.

The light turned, and Vi made it through the line to the freeway entrance. The cars rushed, packed tight like ants moving toward a prize piece of fruit. The navigation estimated five hours. With stops, Vi figured they would arrive around midnight. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew getting into an unknown city so late was unwise. She'd only ever seen pictures of Nashville, but even those felt disjointed: The bar lights of Music Row, street performers, and smiling stock photos of line dancing. None of these attractions appealed to her now. Vi thought of disappearing into this new place. Plenty of people, plenty of crowds, and more than enough things to do if she ever left her next motel room again. Vi wanted to be out though. Holing up in the first motel room had been a mistake, she decided. Perhaps she'd needed it for a little bit, but she couldn't be afraid to push herself. Webb had been good at that.

As the cars crept along the freeway, Vi thought about the apartment she'd called home. She remembered that metal on metal sound. Distant and rhythmic. Webb coming home, walking up the stairs, the snap button of his coat sleeve hitting the railing. She'd pose herself, wanting to appear busy. Not that she wasn't: she'd vacuumed in straight lines, changed out their towels, and wiped all sandy textured cornmeal off the counter

from their Thursday night tradition of making pizza at home. He used to work at a pizza place, and had learned all the secrets of that perfect crisp crust. One time he'd been arranging the cold dough to warm on top of their oven when he'd reached for her hands. He'd held her so gently, rubbing his thumb across her knuckles. "Sometimes it feels like we've always been doing this," he had said. Then he'd smiled and kissed her.

His key ring would knock against the doorknob and the lock would slide open. He'd leave his bag on the floor and walk across the carpet towards her, shoes still on. She would stand behind the plaid couch, her hands gripping the wooden frame.

She would ask him if he was ready to eat. She would search his body for answers. Back then, there were still so many things to love him for. But that was the old life talking, her former self that she needed to leave behind. Squinting against the setting sunlight reflecting off the traffic, Vi forced herself to remember what would happen next. She let the need for his love fall over her. He used to stand in their doorway, his hands deep in his coat pockets. His shoulders sat square and sure. Then with narrowed eyes, he would hold her gaze until he'd crossed the room and disappeared into their bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

I no longer accept this kind of love, she reminded herself.

Outside, the traffic left, exit by exit. People returned home. They cooked their evening meals. They showered and went to bed. The sun sank quickly behind hills and the whole landscape glowed ash pink. Signs announced the state border was approaching, and fourteen wheeler trucks began their night shifts. The moon hung like an ornament, two dimensional in a textured sky.

On and on she drove. Numb and exhausted, she tried not to think about this piece of hardware attached to her. She shifted in the car's seat, and held the back support button down until the lumbar pushed deep into her back. With one hand, she massaged the muscles along her neck, stiff from clenching the steering wheel. She traced the implant, following its curves and edges. When she turned her head from side to side, she couldn't sense the implant itself, but only felt the thin skin of her neck tighten against the obstacle.

Her headlights illuminated a blue sign ahead where white cursive lettering spelled out TENNESSEE. Webb used to talk about taking big trips together. He was always the one with the ideas. That was a quality Vi loved about him. She admired how he could talk for hours about all the things they'd need to consider for a trip, or how he would point out the pros and cons of one country versus another. He'd only been to Mexico and Canada as far as Vi knew, but that was more than she'd done. People tended to think she was from "somewhere" because of her dark skin. To Webb's credit, when people asked where she was *really* from, he'd answer, "She was born in Detroit, you racist. You want her to get her entire family album or something?"

Vi grew up a middle child with two older brothers and a younger sister. Both her parents had worked long hours at a small, private college in Buffalo, New York. It seemed like everyone in her family had something they were good at, but Vi slipped through high school feeling invisible. No one needed her for anything. Then, her first year at community college, she'd met Webb in a seminar. The course's theme was love, and as the room full of students read variations of classic love stories, Vi wondered about the tall boy with hair falling over his eyes. As the class debated the meaning of Tristan

and Isolde's black sails, Vi wondered how such consuming love would feel. When the boy finally asked her out, she accepted without hesitation. At mid-semester, the class watched *Casablanca* and Vi sang the film's song to herself for weeks. Webb moved quickly, and she saw no reason not to go along with him. With Webb, the world had new colors. With Webb, she found all her missing pieces.

A sign for a Charge 'N Go station loomed high above the thick treetops, gray against the bright lights of the freeway. Vi signaled off at the next exit. Here she could stretch, walk Anise around the parking lot, and pick up something to eat with the sign-up cash in her wallet.

Cracks in the pavement spread like giant vines had been ripped from the street. The car bumped and wobbled towards a red light. Sitting still after the lulling movement of the freeway felt fake somehow, like her body was still rushing forward. She needed to be out of the car for a while. Anise stood in the passenger seat, facing the scattered repair shops and insurance agents. A partial moon and square fast food signs interrupted the otherwise sleeping town. There were no cars on the road as Vi drove toward the radiating white light of the charging station. Two cars parked in front of the convenience store entrance: a red four door and a monster truck.

Vi pulled up to a charger and turned the car off. She needed to pee, but she hooked Anise's leash on first. With the door open, the sounds and smells of the world seemed magnified. Crickets chirped loudly, and large bugs flew around the lights. A sad country song crackled through the speakers. A walking stick bigger than Vi's hand sat on top of the charger. Its uncaring eyes stared at her. As Vi hooked her car up, the walking stick showed no signs of leaving. It lifted its front leg to its mouth like it had something

hard to think about. What troubles could happen in the life of an insect at a charging station? None Vi could think of, as long as it didn't hitch a ride on a windshield. Anise shook herself, and with four paws on solid ground, she stretched and sniffed her new surroundings. The leash tugged and Vi pulled Anise away from a glistening tomato slice on the pavement. "Anise, no!"

Vi searched the parking lot for any patch of grass. Between the insect-attracting lights overhead and the utter darkness of the main road, it was like looking at a high contrast picture and trying to see the details. Vi walked to the side of the parking lot, hoping for the best. There was gravel with scrappy weeds growing between discarded paper cups. After some coaxing, Anise crouched in the darkness and released a stream of urine. Vi thanked her for not trying to eat any of the trash and took her back to the car.

Posters and advertisements covered the glass door of the Charge 'N Go store. Vi pushed the door open and walked inside. The store was set up like spokes on a wheel, each aisle and section meeting in the middle where three registers sat on a curved countertop. Vi scanned the walls for bathroom doors. A sign hung in the makeshift dining area with an arrow pointing to a hidden corner. She walked past a table with a leather-clad man hunched over coffee. A yellow bucket with a dried-up mop sat forgotten outside of the bathroom marked LADIES.

Vi opened the wooden door and closed it behind her. It was so light and hollow sounding that she wondered how good of a barrier it really was. She unbuttoned her jean shorts and pulled them down to her knees. The bare bulb washed any warmth from her skin color. In this light she looked almost grey. When she finished, she stood and held her

shoe down on the silver handle, flushing twice. She'd learned quickly that the water pressure of a convenience store could never be counted on.

In the mirror, her faraway eyes caught herself staring. As she lathered her hands in the ice cold water, she frowned, and squinted her face into different poses. Where had these lines come from? A scattered boundary across her forehead, and even folds above her eyes that seemed bigger somehow. With her hands still wet, she twisted the small hoops in her ears so they hung straight. The implant didn't stand out much. It looked more like a strange scar behind her ear. Even from the side, it sat snug against her skin. Knowing it was there made it feel larger though. With time, maybe she wouldn't feel it as much. She stepped backward to get a more appropriate perspective on how she looked. The ponytail she'd tied up hours ago was to the left of center. Vi undid her hair, bent over and dragged her fingers through all of her hair until it hung in front of her. With quickness that only comes from years of unconscious practice, she twirled her hair into a bun on top of her head. In the mirror, she tested what smiling looked like. It still felt too foreign to her.

She opened the door and stepped around the mop. She noticed the faint grease smell in the air and her stomach rumbled in anticipation. She decided she was definitely hungry. Hungrier than she'd felt in a long time. The man in the dining area was gone now. The chair was pushed in, but the coffee cup sat there. A beacon of beige in a sea of red vinyl and aluminum chairs.

Vi walked to the food bar. She knew better than to go for one of the rotating hot dogs. But the mozzarella sticks and fried spring rolls smelled too good to turn down. She gathered a few of each into a paper take-out box and then headed toward the candy aisle.

The row of bright colored, reflective wrappers reminded her of going to the movies. Except now, she could get whatever she wanted without worrying about Webb's judgment. He thought she ate too much sugar. She thought he drank too much sometimes, but she never dreamed of telling him how she felt about it. Webb found plenty of opportunities to talk to her about her diet, how sugar was bad for her, and that no one actually needs a candy bar. In the months before she'd left, Vi stashed chocolate in places he wouldn't think to look. An empty box of sanitary napkins that she kept in her closet. She realized now that she hadn't taken that with her. The thought of him finding her junk food stash made her laugh and feel sick all at the same time. She shifted the food to her left hand while she plucked candy bars from the shelf. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a king size bar of her favorite caramel and chocolate candy. She took a stack of three. What was junk food for anyway? *For when you feel like junk*, she thought.

"Pow-pow!" A little blond kid in a sheriff's costume barreled down the candy aisle with his fingers bunched into the shape of guns.

"Ah, you got me!" Vi said. She grabbed her shirt in pretend pain and closed her eyes. "That's some good shooting, Sheriff. You must practice a lot."

"Oh yeah, all the time. I make my little brother be the Indian sometimes." His big grin went away. "Not like you, though. The other kind of Indian."

"Maybe your brother could be your trusty saloon owner instead?"

"Are you really hungry?" The boy pointed his gun-hand at her candy-topped takeout box.

"Yep, this is my dinner."

"My mom says candy is only for special days," the boy said.

Vi laughed. "I guess today is special then."

The boy pulled at his sheriff's badge. "Tomorrow is special."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"We're going to Graceland!"

Vi searched in her memory for what that was. Elvis. His house. A museum. She opened her mouth to ask the kid another question but he'd moved down the aisle for a better view of the front windows. His family was loading back into their van, waving for him to hurry up.

"Well, bye!" he said.

Vi added a bag of fruit-flavored candy and a cold bottled coffee drink to her stack and headed to the register. Behind it, a punk girl with bleached hair sat on a stool. In her hand, she held a can of jerky made to look like chewing tobacco.

"I'm thinking about putting this up on the chew shelf." She nodded toward the row of cans colored to match their flavor. "You think anyone would notice?"

"Probably not," Vi said. Talking with the sheriff kid was the first conversation she'd had in hours. He'd made her smile, and it felt so good not to worry about anything for a few minutes that she wasn't ready to give the feeling up yet. The girl began scanning her food items. "They'd probably think it was some limited edition thing," Vi said, "and pay double for it."

The clerk girl laughed. "That's so true. Ugh. Anyway, anything else for you today?"

Vi shook her head. The wall behind the girl had every variety of tobacco possible. Cans of chew, cigarettes of different lengths, flavors, packaging. Gold seals, electric pink

packaging, and sale stickers. It was a whole world she'd never taken part in, lit up in fluorescent lighting.

"Want to know something weird?" The clerk girl had that glazed-over look of someone at the end of a long shift who will take any sort of entertainment to help the time pass. "That wall is my favorite part of the job."

"Selling them?"

"Stocking them. It's all just so *organized*. So mindless." She checked her nails for something.

Vi thought about this. "Do you ever want to help them? I mean, don't they know it's dangerous?"

The clerk girl shook her head. "I see a lot of weird shit here. I mean, night shift, you know? I learned pretty quick that some people don't care about themselves like that. To each their own, though. If they want to go their whole lives finding new ways to hurt themselves, that's just what they're going to do."

This was more than Vi expected. She wasn't sure how to react. The pause in their conversation lingered, interrupted by the electronic beeps from the girl scanning each food item.

"Your total is \$15.05."

Vi opened her wallet and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill. It was a relief to have some money again.

"Have a good day, or night I guess." The girl slid the receipt across the counter and hopped back on the stool all in one fluid movement.

Outside, Vi hurried to the car. The smell of food was torture. Anise had moved over to the driver's side and was pressing her nose against the glass. She wagged her tail and barked.

"Smells good, huh?" Vi asked Anise.

While the car continued charging, Vi ate the hot food and half a candy bar. She saved a crisp piece of eggroll for Anise, who swallowed it without chewing. It was almost ten at night, and Vi sat sideways in the driver's seat with Anise curled up in her lap. Her fox face pushed into the crook of Vi's arm. The dog exhaled, sighed, and shut her eyes. Warm and secure, Vi fell asleep too.

The beeping of the "full charge" notice from the charging machine outside woke Vi up. Anise jumped back to the passenger seat, sensing they would soon be on the move again.

Vi got out of the car, back to the sounds of crickets and slow country music. She unplugged the charger and fed the machine enough cash to cover the charging time. The events of yet another full day hit her. She leaned against the car and looked up into the night. What had she been thinking about earlier? Happy memories with Webb? If Webb was so wonderful, if she really was as lucky as he said she was to be with him, what the hell was she doing here? Her face flushed. Twenty-nine should have been settling, blooming and sturdy. Instead it was a ship out at sea. Not even a ship, a row boat. A raft that Webb was hacking off pieces at every turn she took. She realized Webb was the one with all the ideas because he dismissed any that came from her. Webb didn't deserve any happy memories. He'd erased them with every harsh word, every deliberate betrayal of her trust. *If he cared about me...* Vi started the thought but was unable to finish it. He

might have cared in the beginning. She could see that now. But Webb's caring or love in those first few months had only been part of the picture. He had groomed her for the exact relationship he wanted: one of complete power over her.

"I could never be happy if my girlfriend wasn't happy too." This was something he'd said in the beginning. At the time, tucked away in the corner of a coffee shop, huddled over coffee that he'd bought her, Vi had thought his statement sweet. Romantic, even. Looking back, this was one of many rules Webb set up in those nice months. It meant Vi was not allowed to show anything other than joy from being with him. Webb saw anything she felt as a direct result of his influence, and if he deemed it unfair, she would be punished. Some punishments were immediate, while others Webb let simmer for days.

Vi wiped her cheeks on the back of her hands and rubbed the tears in like lotion. She got back in the car, took two swigs of the now lukewarm coffee, and drove back toward the freeway.

She hated that in running from Webb she had to fight with herself. Vi pushed the pedals to get the car up to speed with the sparse freeway traffic. She'd let the good memories of Webb take over earlier. She'd once again felt that fake-comfort that comes from being with someone who will tell you who you are supposed to be.

"I can't keep holding on to those months, Anise."

The dog looked up from her curled-up position in the passenger seat. The dim light of the center console reflected green against Anise's wide, black eyes.

“Whoever I knew then, that wasn’t who he really was.” Vi signaled and merged the car into the left lane. Thru-traffic, no stopping anytime soon. “I guess that’s really who I was in love with. That’s who I kept waiting to come home.”

Vi drove south for another three hours. The hills grew wider and steeper, and the lull of countryside and suburbs grew restless as she approached Nashville. Even through the air conditioning in the car, the air felt thicker. Trees bunched over the cement dividers lining the interstate. Signs advertised attractions, colleges, music, food, and historical buildings.

It was one in the morning when Vi exited into downtown. She wanted to see Music Row before she found a place to sleep. Vi followed the directions from the center console, turning down one street after another. Stone buildings that seemed over-sized for a city loomed from wide front lawns. Skyscrapers alternated with bars and pawn shops. Signs everywhere advertised live music and line dancing. Multi-colored neon lights and bright street lamps gave a feeling of sunset or sunrise, a never-ending night. Vi hadn’t expected so many people. She sat at a stop light and watched swarms of people stumble out of bars, laughing. She watched a small young woman with big blonde hair dip back into a kiss with a tall man. He wore a dark cowboy hat, but somehow, the hat fit his outfit and the place perfectly. Vi wondered if their love was real.

Block after block, Vi snuck sideways glances at the glass and brick shrines of country music. The smell of alcohol and dreams in the air. It felt like any person walking around could just as well be a famous person, or, even luckier, a rising star. Tourist shops closed for the night had all the trappings of what Vi thought country music looked like:

hats, boots, cheap guitars. Music Row seemed genuinely authentic in its image, though. Like how someone can be in on the joke and become it at the same time.

Vi turned down a side street and consulted the map. She needed a place to sleep for the night. They'd probably only stay one night, at least until she had the energy to figure out what she wanted to do. She set the parameters for her search: cheap, close, dogs allowed. Hits for open rooms popped up on the screen. There was one a few blocks east, an old apartment building that had been renovated into tiny rooms. Dogs under twenty-five pounds were allowed with no fee.

Vi put the car back into drive and headed out to the hotel. She parked in a crumbling lot behind the building, picking a spot between two pickup trucks. With Anise's leash in one hand and her suitcase in another, she walked through the parking lot, past the chain-link fence, and around to the front of the building. Inside, the unofficial theme appeared to be yellow. The low-ceiling lobby that looked more like a hallway was covered in orange and yellow zigzag carpet. The carpet ran halfway up the walls, and stopped at dark wood paneling. A dusty chandelier hung out of place above the desk. It looked like a manager wanted to make the place "classy" but stopped after one lighting purchase.

Vi stepped up to the front desk. A sign next to a silver bell advised her to ring it for service. She never liked ringing bells like these. It felt rude, like something you would do to an animal rather than a human being. Anise yawned and stretched by her feet. Vi waited five minutes, but no one stepped into the lobby to help her. She touched the top of the bell as gently as she could. The ding sounded and lingered. Still no one came. Vi waited. She rang it again, a bit louder, then, cringing, she pressed hard so a second ring

would chime. The sharp note echoed. The wall by the side of the desk slid open: a sliding door disguised with wallpaper and carpet. An elderly man with a bandage across his nose shuffled out.

“Need a room?”

“Yes, just one night,” Vi said.

“Alright, let me wake the computer up.” He banged on the computer’s keyboard.

Vi couldn’t guess how old the model was. The man asked for her ID and payment, and he glanced too quickly at her drivers license to have read anything from it.

“Third floor. Breakfast is six to nine.” The man handed Vi a key on an oversize ring. A tag labeled 303 hung from it.

“Thank you.”

“And no loud music,” the man said. He returned to behind the sliding door before Vi got to the elevator.

On the third floor, the orange and yellow carpeting followed her. The sounds of the city from a lone window at the end of the hallway were muted. A siren cycled in the distance. Vi found room 303 and jiggled the key into the lock. When she pushed the wooden door open, it thumped against something in the room. Vi held Anise back while she flipped the lights on. The room was so tiny that the door was hitting the bed. Vi squeezed around the door and called Anise to her. The dog skipped past the door and bounded up onto the bed, ready to play.

The room was an obstacle course to some extent. With the bed up against the door, there was little floor space to speak of. A flat TV bulged from the wall, and the

bathroom looked like it had been shoved into a closet. The shower was so narrow that the curtain had been cut in half with scissors. Bits of nylon frayed at the edges.

Vi unpacked Anise's water bowl first. She filled it to the brim and set it in the corner of the linoleum-tiled bathroom. While Vi found her toothbrush and face soap, the dog lapped at the water. They got ready for bed as if on auto-pilot. Vi washed her face mechanically and dried off on the edge of a towel stiff with bleach. She scoured the sour aftertaste of the fried food and coffee out of her mouth and left the toothbrush balancing across a plastic cup. She tried not to touch the bathroom counter. Better to pretend that everything was clean than to wonder about it.

With all the lights off except the small lamp on the makeshift side table, Vi crawled into the bed. The mattress dipped into the shape of all the people who had slept in this bed before her. Vi tried to shift out of the mold, but gravity rolled her right back. Anise sprawled across the other pillow and let out a groan. "I know, it's way past your bedtime," Vi said.

Vi reached over and turned the lamp off. She let the dimming noise of the night outside wash over her until it became muffled like elevator music. When she rolled to her side, she felt the cool pillowcase rub against the implant. The nearby skin grew warm, then throbbing. Vi switched to her other side, holding her hand over the implant. *Too sore*, she realized. *Shouldn't sleep on it for a few nights*. She rested her hand on Anise's chest and felt her heartbeat slow as the dog fell asleep. Sleep reached for Vi in a haze, and she felt her eyes and mind shutting down against her will. Tomorrow, she would decide where to go from here.

Vi woke up to Anise standing on her chest. The dog stared down at her, then switched to sniffing her ear. Vi nudged the dog off her, so Anise resorted to whining. “Oh I’m so hungry, I’m starving. Please feed me.” Vi mocked the dog. She pushed herself up and folded the covers to the other side of the bed.

It was seven. Two more hours until her implant turned on and her life became a broadcast for research. She had plenty of time to get her morning routine done in peace. Anise always needed to eat first thing in the morning. It was as if her stomach churned all night in eager anticipation of more kibble. While the dog gobbled down the food, Vi hooked a bra on under her T-shirt and got into her jean shorts. Anise began to bark, a signal that the bowl was empty and now it was time to go outside. Vi snapped the leash on and put her ID and the hotel key in her pocket. A quick glance in the mirror to fix her hair, and they were out the door. The hallway smelled like cigarettes and cleaning fluids. The elevator rattled up to them, and took them back to the lobby. A card table hosted a box of powdered donuts and hot coffee. A basket of browning apples accompanied the selection.

Vi walked past the food and out the front door. The air felt heavy in her lungs, and the sun felt brighter than it looked from the windows inside. The day was heating up already, and the abundance of asphalt didn’t help. They walked around the side of the building where a small patch of grass struggled between two city trees. Anise relieved herself quickly, and Vi followed behind her with a green plastic bag. They walked until Vi found a public trashcan, then headed back to their room.

After Vi showered in the narrow stall, she used a mirror from one of her makeup cases to inspect the lines around the implant. Her skin looked fine, and the implant still

lay flat. She braided her wet hair and got dressed for the day. At eight o'clock, she still had four hours until they needed to leave the hotel. She couldn't think in the cramped room. Though outside was hot and humid, she thought moving around might help her make some decisions. She put on socks and shoes, which set Anise off on a happy barking spree. "You're not coming yet, miss," Vi said. She turned on the TV to drown out any noise the dog might make while she was gone, and slipped out the door. She told Anise she'd be back soon, and pulled the door closed behind her.

Outside, Vi walked towards Music Row nibbling on a powdered donut from the hotel. On the main street, she walked downhill, letting her eyes wander wherever they pleased. Shops were open already, and the smell of breakfasts cooking on griddles met her in waves. The people on the streets looked different than the crowds the night before. Here, tourist families stopped to admire windows or the posters plastered on each street lamp. Mothers snapped pictures of their children in front of landmarks, erasing themselves from their own trip. The neon lights looked dimmer in the daylight, and the music was turned down to a sober level.

Vi walked with crowds, feeling comfortably lost amongst other strangers to the city. She blended in by not blending in, keeping with the standard tourist tradition. Every storefront and bar competed for her attention, and Vi felt at peace. She swam through the crowds as if in a dream. The hustle and energy occupied her mind and kept her from worrying. She wandered into a live music room advertising a family-friendly morning songwriter showcase. Vi sat in the back, near the door. Her shoes crunched over peanut shells. A square-jawed man too pretty to be real leaned against a tall stool on the stage. He slung a guitar strap around his neck and flashed a practiced smile at the crowd. As he

strummed some tune that felt familiar and new at the same time, Vi laughed to herself. She'd remembered a moment years ago in a car with Webb. Flipping through radio stations, he'd stumbled upon a country station playing a sad break-up song. He'd ranted to Vi over the copy-cat fakeness of such songs. Listening to the open mike in the heart of it all, Vi wondered what else Webb might be wrong about.

She sat through the man's fifteen minute set while people trickled in and out of the bar. Her feet tapped to the rhythm and she allowed herself to relax and take in the scene. Around the stage, there were small square tables as high as her chest with tall bar stools, some occupied and some empty. A young mother stood and held onto her daughter's rib cage so the girl could sit on the tall stool. The girl swung her feet back and forth, unable to reach the first metal bar holding the seat together. Nearest to the stage, a small group of similar looking men, each holding a guitar waited their turn. Two women in matching outfits and long curled hair whispered to each other over music sheets a few tables away. Vi wondered if they were sisters.

"Anyone sitting here?"

Vi turned towards the source of this voice, a man at least ten years her senior leaning one elbow onto her table. His thin face was accentuated with a patch of hair under his lip. Each table had two or three stools around it, so it wasn't out of the question to share a table with strangers. But Vi noticed this man was alone, and there were other tables with seats free.

"No, you can take the chair." Vi chose her words carefully, hoping to clarify that she wasn't interested in sharing anything else with this man.

"What's a beauty like you doing sitting all alone?"

Vi sighed. “I’m just hear for the music, sorry.”

The man turned toward the stage. An announcer listed the name of the next act. It was the two sisters Vi had noticed earlier. Their names rhymed, and they both smiled in the same way as they took the stage.

“This? Well, if you’re looking for the *real* Nashville, I’d be happy to show you around. What are you up to today?”

“Thank you, I’m busy though.”

“Doing what?”

“I’m busy.”

The man stopped watching the sisters and turned his whole body toward Vi.

“Why are you being such a bitch?”

Vi felt as if she’d been punched in the chest. His word’s echoed in her mind and she tried to decipher where she’d gone wrong.

“Typical stuck up city girls, can’t be bothered with a nice country guy like me.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you, I’m just not interested in you like that.”

“Like what? Was I asking you to blow me right here, huh? Maybe you should learn to take a compliment.” The man’s eyes narrowed as he looked her up and down.

“You’re not even that hot. Especially for a brown girl.”

Vi’s face flushed. She wasn’t looking for trouble. She tried to run through what she’d said so far. She didn’t think she’d said anything that should have upset him. Her arms froze, and her feet felt like anchors. The women on stage reached a bridge in their song, and they harmonized about why they wouldn’t get into someone’s truck. Vi took a deep breath and slid off her seat.

Something grabbed the soft part of her arm and squeezed. Vi turned and found the man's face inches from her own.

"I can give you what you haven't had before." His brown eyes stared, cold. "I bet you taste like chocolate."

The song switched back to the chorus. No one around them seemed to notice. Then a voice, another man's. Vi couldn't tell from where. "Everything alright over there?" The room seemed darker than before. The women on stage whispered their lyrics, moving in synch and nodding to each other to the beat of their music. Vi's breathing became shallower. She needed to leave. Go, her mind commanded. Now.

Vi ran. She moved too fast to catch the other attendees' faces. Scattered applause broke out for the song's conclusion. Vi didn't wonder what anyone must have thought about her running until she got back to her hotel room, and locked the door. Anise didn't bark like her usual greeting, but moved backward out of Vi's way.

Vi sat in the middle of the bed, her back leaning against the headboard. Anise jumped up without a sound, and lay down parallel to Vi's legs. Then, she noticed the time: 9:30. Everything at the bar would have been recorded. Hot, embarrassed tears leaked down Vi's face. She hated the thought of people watching her fail to ward off a stranger's advances. She imagined the researchers in an all white room, taking notes on the exchange and shaking their heads at her. Their lives would be put together. They wouldn't be living out of motels and attracting strange men. Anise lay her head on Vi's knee.

"Why do I even try, Anise?"

The dog sighed, and closed her eyes as Vi stroked the dog's head. Vi reached for her phone, tapped open a map of the country, and stared.